

THE ADMIRAL'S WARD

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BY MRS. ALEXANDER.

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Her Dearest Fee.
The Admiral's Ward.
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The Freres. [April 20th.
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- A Village Tragedy.

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MRS. ALEXANDER

AUTHOR OF

'THE WOOING O'T,' 'HER DEAREST FOE,' 'WHICH SHALL IT BE?' ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

THE morning tide of business some dozen years ago was at its fullest flow in the extensive premises of Messrs. Thurston and Trent, solicitors, Sydenham Chambers, E.C. Rows of clerks in the ground-floor offices were rapidly covering sheets of paper with crowds of monotonous words, or columns of appalling figures. Others came to and fro, and spoke frequent messages into tubes up and down. Above, on the first floor, were the private rooms of the partners—solemn chambers, where law assumed its stateliest aspect.

Upstairs Mr. Trent had been in consultation with Mr. Thurston and one of their chief clerks respecting some difficult points in a heavy Chancery suit. Mr. Trent, a slight spare man, with keen dark eyes, hair just touched with gray, and a countenance somewhat worn and watchful, had turned his chair a little from the knee-hole table loaded with papers before which he sat, to look at his partner, who stood in front of the empty grate.

Mr. Thurston was the type of a high-class man of business. His Oxford-gray morning-coat and nether garments had come from the hands of an artist, his snowy linen was the ‘outward and visible sign’ of exalted respectability, and his pale cream-coloured summer waistcoat perfection itself. His neat black tie was surmounted by a face somewhat old-fashioned in aspect but by no means unpleasing. A much older man than his partner, his hair was yet quite free from silver threads, and his eyes could look all men clearly in the face, although they needed the help of the small unobtrusive eye-glass with which he habitually played while discussing knotty points.

The third in the group was a young man of perhaps

awaiting the owner of a fine estate.—

‘What is the rent-roll?’ asked Mr. Trent.

‘I do not exactly know—not under five thousand a year, I fancy,’ returned Piers.

‘I hope it is unencumbered,’ said Mr. Thurston; ‘a

ring hard in the eyes. Altogether there was a figure which could not be unnoticed, as he stood at the other side of Mr. Trent's table holding the back of a chair with his long shapely hand.

'Well, then, that is the line we shall adopt,' said Mr. Thurston in conclusion; 'and now I think I shall take my biscuit and sherry.'

'It is almost one o'clock,' observed Mr. Trent. 'I have not finished half my letters, and I have an appointment at two about that compromise of Thompson's.'

'Nevertheless,' said the young clerk, 'I am going to ask for a few minutes of your time on my own account. I see in to-day's *Times*, he continued, 'that a cousin of mine has been killed when hunting. Here is the paragraph:' and doubling down the paper at the passage he had found, he handed it to Mr. Thurston, who, raising his glass, read as follows:—

'The accident, reported in our impression of yesterday, to Mr. Hugh Piers, of Pierslynn, while hunting with the Saltshire hounds, has, we regret to say, terminated fatally. The unfortunate gentleman breathed his last yesterday evening in the cottage where he had been carried from the field. His death will cast a gloom over a large circle with whom he was deservedly popular, both as an excellent landlord and a thorough sportsman. Mr. Piers was unmarried, and we understand his estates devolve on a distant cousin.'

'Ah—um—I think we have heard of this relative,' said Mr. Thurston.

'It affects you, Reginald?' asked Mr. Trent.

'Considerably,' he returned, with a quick, irrepressible, exultant laugh; 'inasmuch as I am now Piers of Pierslynn.'

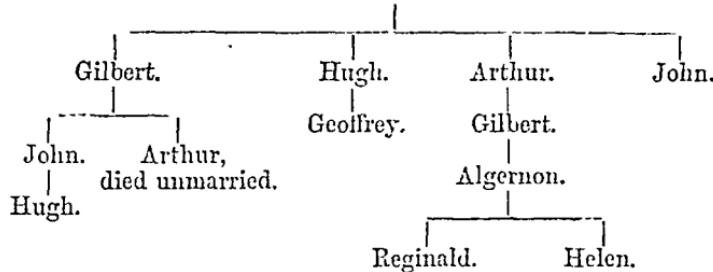
'You are sure you can prove your title?' said Mr. Trent.

'Certain,' replied Piers. 'I am well up in the ramifications of my family; and though I never dreamed of

succeeding to the estate—for this poor fellow was little more than thirty-nine, and in rude health,—I have been always aware I was his next-of-kin. If you will glance at this—drawing a paper from his pocket—it will show you how I stand.'

He unfolded the paper as he spoke, and placed it before Mr. Trent. It was inscribed thus:—

Dorothy Piers, of Pierslynn, m. Geoffrey Stapleton, who took her name.



'Here, you see,' he continued, 'is our common ancestor, Geoffrey Stapleton Piers. He had four sons. The man just killed was the grandson of the eldest. I am the third in descent from Arthur. Mrs. Trent is the great-granddaughter of John.'

'That seems quite clear,' said Mr. Thurston. 'But what about this Geoffrey, son of Hugh? Had he no family?'

'No. Geoffrey died unmarried; in fact, as is usual, only the pauperised branches of our family increased and multiplied.'

'Well, my young friend,' said Mr. Thurston, 'accept my best congratulations and good wishes.'

'It will be a great change for you, if your claim proves valid,' remarked his partner gravely.

'Very great,' returned Piers. 'From genteel pauperism to fortune and position!' The young man's face grew radiant, as imagination depicted the pleasures and privileges awaiting the owner of a fine estate.

'What is the rent-roll?' asked Mr. Trent.

'I do not exactly know—not under five thousand a year, I fancy,' returned Piers.

'I hope it is unencumbered,' said Mr. Thurston; 'a

bachelor of sporting proclivities is only too apt to outrun his means.'

'Not Hugh Piers!' exclaimed his successor. 'He was a shrewd fellow, by all accounts, who never let pleasure cost him too much.'

'Well, well, you have my best wishes; and, I may add, the law has lost a smart disciple;' which polite and proper sentence brought Mr. Thurston to the door. Before he had touched the handle, however, it was opened rather abruptly—a clerk entered, and, with a deferential 'I beg your pardon,' laid a card before Mr. Trent, saying, 'Wishes to see you, sir.'

'Show him up,' returned Mr. Trent; adding, as the clerk went out, 'It is the Admiral—Admiral Desbarres. I wonder what has brought him to town again. Reginald! I have no time now; but dine with us to-day, and we will talk matters over. Mrs. Trent will be very glad to see you.'

'I will just shake hands with the excellent Admiral before I leave you,' said Mr. Thurston, pausing.

'And I——' began Piers, when he was interrupted by the entrance of an old gentleman, above middle height, with slightly stooped shoulders, iron-gray hair, and whiskers nearly white; a thoughtful, almost sad expression softened his handsome embrowned face, and full, dark, wistful eyes.

'This is an unexpected pleasure, Admiral,' said Mr. Trent, rising to receive him. 'I hope all's well with you?'

'With me, yes,' returned the Admiral, shaking hands with him; 'but I have come on a sad errand. Is not this gentleman Mr. Piers—Mr. Reginald Piers?' he added, arresting the young man's movement to leave the room.

'Yes,' replied Mr. Trent, as Piers paused and bowed.

'I had the pleasure of meeting you, some time ago, at Mr. Fielden's?—the Rev. Frederic Fielden's,' continued the Admiral in a pleasant deliberate voice, and with much grave courtesy.

'I remember perfectly having been presented to you at Cheddington, nearly three years ago; but I hardly thought you would remember me.'

'I seldom forget,' said the Admiral. 'I regret I have to tell you that our mutual friend, Mr. Fielden, died about

a week ago. It is this that has brought me up to town on my way to Dresden, where he and his family have been residing for some time. You are aware that my ward, Laura Piers, who is some distant relation of yours, I believe, always lived with her Uncle Fielden ? Poor fellow ! His death has been very sudden. His niece, daughter, and a young son are left sadly desolate.'

'I am very sorry to hear this,' replied Reginald, with an air of much concern. 'It will be a blow in every way to Dick, the eldest son, who was my chum in former days.'

'He is in a banking-house in Calcutta, is he not ?'

asked the Admiral.

'He is, and doing very well, I believe.'

'This is the second sudden death we have heard of this morning,' said Mr. Thurston gravely. 'It is startling. I will leave you with my colleague, and wish you good-day, Admiral Desbarres.'

'Good-morning,' said the Admiral, politely dismissing Reginald Piers, who bowed himself out, while the Admiral sat down opposite his confidential man of business.

At length Mr. Trent remarked mildly, 'I am quite at your service ; *but I have an appointment at two.*'

'I will not trespass long on your time,' said the Admiral in his gentle voice, which one could hardly fancy shouting orders through a speaking-trumpet ; 'but I am somewhat puzzled how to act under the present circumstances.'

'How do you mean, my dear sir ?'

'I mean, how shall I best fulfil the serious responsibilities which have devolved upon me through the death of this poor gentleman ?'

'Of Mr. Fielden ? I do not see what responsibilities have devolved upon you through his death.'

'They are very distinct to me. For years Mr. Fielden's kind care of my ward provided her with a happy home, and relieved me of all anxiety on her account. Now, he is summoned by the Great Master, and the boy and girl who were as brother and sister to Laura are left, I fear, unprovided for. How can I separate them, and leave these helpless young creatures to battle with life ?'

'Your ward has, I presume, some fortune of her own ?'

'An officer's daughter is seldom well dowered—of

course, it is clearly my duty to care for *her*; but the others — I must help them, though I can scarce devise the means.'

'But, my dear sir, this is benevolence run riot. The children of the late Mr. Fielden have no shadow of claim upon you.'

The Admiral heard Mr. Trent with an unmoved countenance, while he drew a large note-book from his pocket, and turned over its contents slowly. 'I see,' he resumed, selecting a slip of paper covered with clear, carefully neat writing and figures. 'by this memo. of my resources, I see there is a sum of two thousand five hundred pounds which only pays three and a half per cent. I should like to get higher interest, say five or five and a half.'

'Certainly you might, Admiral Desbarres; but, if you remember, when we invested that amount for you, you said you only cared for a fair and safe income, and that you would run no risk.'

'True; but circumstances have changed. I heard a short time back of an undertaking in Hungary, a scheme to connect some towns—the names of which I cannot recall —by means of a canal, for which the nephew of a friend of mine was organising a company. He assures me that money invested in this undertaking would yield a return of eight per cent to the original stockholders.'

Mr. Trent shook his head with unmistakable disapprobation. 'No, no, my dear sir, you must touch nothing of the kind. They would probably give you eight per cent for eighteen months or thereabouts—that is, they would give you about two hundred pounds for your two thousand five hundred, and that is all you would ever see of the investment. No! if you *must* have higher interest, we will look out for you; but remember there is scarcely anything safe over five per cent.'

'It is a small provision,' said the Admiral thoughtfully 'and it is evident the poor children are almost destitute. There can be but one answer to their appeal. I am now on my way to Dresden; but before quitting England I wish to leave matters in train to increase my income.'

'I shall of course do my best to carry out your instructions; but I must entreat you not to take a load on your

eightpenny letters, and your excellent company. I am going to be a "a fine young English gentleman who lives on his estate!" Look here!—showing him the *Times*—'read and wonder!' The astounded listener took the newspaper and skimmed the paragraph pointed out.

'And do you mean to say you are this man's heir?' he exclaimed incredulously; for, to do Reginald justice, he always had too much *savoir-faire* to talk of wealthy or exalted relatives.

'Yes, I do! Look here!' He spread out the genealogical table, and pointed triumphantly to his own position as undoubted heir. 'What do you say to that, my boy!—a fine old ancestral place, five thousand a year at the very least, a good round sum of ready money—a well-filled stable and well-kept preserves. Why, it is like magic! and, between ourselves, I never was so hard up as at the present moment. I protest, the last two nights I have lost no end of sleep, thinking of a bill that will come to maturity next week, and wondering where the deuce I should find funds to meet it. I should like to dance a hornpipe on your desk, West, if it were not too undignified!'

'I'm sure I am truly delighted to hear of your good fortune!' exclaimed West cordially.

'Thank you, West; I believe you are! and I hope to see you at Pierslynn, where I will teach you to "cross country," old fellow!'

'I am afraid I am too old to learn,' returned West, laughing good-humouredly.

'By Jove! it is a special providence that I know how myself!' cried Reginald; 'I never had cash enough to keep even a donkey.'

'But, Piers, what will Holden say?'—in a tone expressive of exultation and curiosity.

'God knows! Of course he will not believe a word of it.'

Here there was a whistle from the speaking-tube. West responded.

'You are wanted in Mr. Thurston's room, Piers,' he said; and added, as Reginald was about to fold up his memo., 'leave that; Holden will be here directly.'

'I don't care!' said Reginald, with elaborate indifference; but he left the paper behind him. When he returned he

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found the third occupant of the inner office standing beside West's table, and looking at the paper with contemptuous scrutiny.

Holden was considerably older than either of his companions, but, though shrewd and capable, was less trusted by his employers. He was suspected of unsteadiness, and was more than once severely indisposed on the eve of the Derby. He was a thick set, dark-complexioned man, of a lower type than Piers or West, with bushy whiskers and rather shifty black eyes. A covert warfare had always existed between him and Reginald Piers, shown chiefly in a species of shotted chaff, in which the latter had much the best of it.

To-day Holden's aspect was forbidding. There was a coarseness in his expression, a carelessness about his dress, that bespoke relaxation of self-respect.

'So ! you have come into your kingdom,' he exclaimed, looking up as Reginald opened the door, 'or you think you have ; but there's many a slip between cup and lip ! Are you sure there isn't a nearer of kin than yourself ?'

'Certain ! Are you so muddle-headed as not to understand that table of degrees ?' cried Reginald, who was less cool than usual.

'Are you so muddle-headed as not to perceive that everything depends on the marriage, or no-marriage, of this fellow ?' pointing to the name of Geoffrey.

'Of course not,' replied Reginald scornfully. 'But it is perfectly well known in the family that he died a bachelor.'

'Nevertheless, he may have left descendants who could trouble you. For all you know, you may have to put some of them out of the way yet.'

Reginald made no reply, but sat down to write, having got somewhat in arrear of his morning's work.

'How soon do you think you will get possession ?' asked West presently.

'I haven't an idea. I dine with Trent to-day. We shall settle what is to be done ; but I do not anticipate any difficulty.'

'Had you ever any relations at a little place called Llanogwen ?' asked Holden suddenly. He had been in deep thought for some moments, gazing at Reginald's

extract from the family tree which still lay on the table before him.

'Not that I know of,' said Reginald carelessly. 'Have you any acquaintances of my name?'

'Acquaintances? O Lord, no! you and yours are altogether a touch above me,' returned Holden, with a sneer. 'But I think I have heard the name.' So saying, he threw the paper at which he had been staring in a fixed, abstracted way across the table, and turning to his own desk, began to open it and move his pens and ruler about in a noisy, reckless manner.

'I saw Admiral Desbarres going up just now,' said West, after all three men had written for some time in silence. 'You know him, don't you, Piers?'

'I have been introduced to him; nothing more.'

'Isn't he a little touched on religious matters?' asked West. 'I remember hearing Mrs. Trent say something to that effect.'

'I say, Piers, do you still hang out at Palmerston Terrace?' asked Holden abruptly. 'I am coming to leave my card on you; for I suppose you intend to give West and myself a spread in honour of your accession. It's clearly your duty.'

'Oh yes! I will bestow a banquet upon you,' said Reginald drily.

'Well, you may count on me. I'll call round at your place to-morrow evening.'

'I am afraid I shall not be at home.'

'Then I'll try again *and* again, till I find you,' returned Holden, with a rather peculiar laugh.

'You are very good.'

'A gentleman wishes to see Mr. Holden,' said one of the clerks from the outer office.

Holden rose, and went out hastily.

'I think Holden is deuced queer to-day,' said West, looking after him.

'He is in some scrape, or was drinking hard last night,' replied Reginald carelessly; 'but I am not going to finish up by a quarrel with the poor devil. Now I must attend to my work.'

CHAPTER II.

THE day which had wrought so important a change in the life of Reginald Piers was drawing to a close ; and while, in their handsome dining-room, in one of the new squares which fill up the space, physical and social, between Westbourne Terrace and Westbourne Grove, Mr. and Mrs. Trent sat long over their strawberries and sauterne, discussing with their guest his future plans—the owner of a far humbler dwelling was walking slowly through her neat but rather scantily-furnished abode, with a thoughtful and even troubled expression ; a tall stately woman, past middle age, though preserving a fine figure, draped in a garment exceedingly ancient as to material, but pieced and trimmed into startling novelty of form. Her still glossy dark hair, streaked slightly with gray, was braided under a contrivance of lace and ribbon, which happily preserved the *juste milieu* between the coquettishness of youth and the dignity of age. Her countenance showed traces of beauty, though the eyes were faded and the lips had grown thin. She held on her left arm a cat with long fine hair, mixed black and yellowish-gray, like a beautiful miniature tiger. A long, bushy tail hung over the supporting arm, the fore-paws and small shapely head resting on her mistress's shoulder, with an air of profound content ; while with her right hand the lady occasionally touched the banisters, regarding her fingers suspiciously, as if on the look-out for dust. Reaching the second floor, the lady paused, and called in audible tones, ‘Collins !’—a pause—no reply—then to the cat, ‘My precious puss ! did I wake you up ? Collins !’ still louder—a faint voice came from the depths, ‘Coming, mum.’

‘Collins ! I am surprised you can let me exhaust myself in this manner, calling *and* calling, when you know I am far from strong. Laziness, Collins, is really a positive sin.’ This, while Collins tumbled upstairs at break-neck speed.

‘I’m sure, mum, I ran the very minit I heard you, and I am sorry——’

'There, there, Collins, don't. I must beg you not to talk. I really cannot bear it. You have quite put what I wanted to say out of my head! Do you know the window in your room is open? I am sure we shall have a storm; go and shut it.'

'Yes, mum; but I am going to bed presently, and then I'll be sure—'

'Now don't answer me, my girl; go and do what I bid you! One of the first duties of a Christian is to obey your pastors and masters.'

'Very well, mum,' proceeding past her mistress at a run.

'Collins! have I not told you that it is not respectful to rush past me in that way? And stay, Collins'—severely—'did you dust these banisters to-day?'

'That I did, mum.'

'I trust you are telling the truth, Collins; but'—holding out her hand, and speaking majestically—'look at that!'—There, Collins, there's the front-door bell. Go, my girl, go, go, go! though,' she went on as the servant hurled herself downstairs, 'it is too late for any useful visit.' And stroking the cat softly, she descended leisurely to the ground floor, where were the dining and drawing rooms.

'A letter for you, mum,' said Collins, meeting her in the hall.

'Indeed!' as if a letter were not a common occurrence; and, taking it, she turned it over with much interest, examining the postmark, and reading the superscription—

Mrs. Crewe, 13 Leamington Road, Westbourne Park.'

'Ho, is from the Admiral!' she exclaimed. 'Here, Collins,

'my precious Toppy; there is a nice drop of milk left

'he jug, give it to her before she goes to bed.' And

clerk' Crewe sallied into her rarely-used drawing-room,

H proceeded, with a visible clearing of her countenance,

loo, open her letter and read as follows:—

'DEAR MRS. CREWE,

repli. 'It is some time since I heard anything of you.

up by' 'But you are well and prospering. Will you be so good

to m, o let me know if you have still room for an inmate?

object in asking is that I shall soon want a home for

'nd Laura Piers, of whom you have heard me speak.

She has just lost her excellent uncle, the Rev. Mr. Fielden, and with him the fatherly protection she has hitherto enjoyed. Will you, then, take the matter into consideration, and let me know, within the new week, what sum you would require for this young lady's board and residence? She should of course share your sitting-room, if agreeable to you, and have the advantage of your society.

'I know how moderate and conscientious you are; I therefore add that my young friend's means are limited, and she would require nothing beyond your own ordinary style of living. Further, Mr. Fielden has left a son and daughter, in what position I am not as yet aware. Should I find it necessary to return to them something of the benefits bestowed upon my ward by their father, I would be glad to know if you could accommodate Miss Fielden also, and the boy during his holiday. I am now on my way to Dresden, and hope to bring back my ward in about a fortnight. My address will be—Victoria Hotel, Dresden.

'I trust you have good accounts from your son.'

'I am, yours very faithfully,

'GEORGE DESBARRES.'

'A ward of the Admiral to reside with me!' ejaculated Mrs. Crewe half aloud. 'Why, it is the very thing!—something always turns up. I was quite cast down when that Mr. Holden left me, though he was really not a gentleman, and very irregular in his payments. Now, it will be quite different to have a nice girl, a lady of position, with me.' Then she looked round rather restlessly, feeling the desperate need of expatiating on her prospects to some one. At that moment, enter Collins with the cat.

'She won't drink the milk, mum, anyhow; but she has lapped up nigh half a saucer full of cold water.'

'Has she, the dear? Really, Collins, there is something quite *distinguée* about Toppy, quite superior to other cats; she has scarcely ever touched milk since she was a kitten. Give her to me! And, Collins, do you think we could put two beds in the large back room on the second floor?'

'It would be a tight fit, mum.'

'I am afraid it would; but I might take it myself, and give them the front one.'

'Are you expecting new lodgers, mum ?'

'I wish, Collins, you would not express yourself with such vulgarity. I do not keep a lodging-house ; I take a few well-recommended inmates ; and I rather expect a young lady, perhaps two, to reside with me ; that is, their guardian, Rear-Admiral Desbarres, wishes to place them under my care. There, you may go, Collins ; and as you have cleaned up the morning-room and kitchen, and must be tired, you can take the rest of that bottle of ale with your bread and cheese.'

'Thank you, mum'—going.

'And, Collins, have you heard how Mr. Brown is to-day ?'

'No, mum ; but I suppose he must be better, for there's Miss Brown a-watering the back-garden.'

'Is she ? I will go and speak to her. Collins ! be sure you shut your window ; I will put Toppy to bed myself.'

So saying, Mrs. Crewe issued forth into the entrance-passage, and proceeded to descend the few steps which led into the garden. The little space in the rear of the house was judiciously laid out, being principally occupied by a large grass-plot, having a group of rose-bushes in the centre, a couple of horse-chestnut trees at the end, and a border of bright flowers and mignonette between the gravel-walk and side-walls.

The next strip of garden was much more elaborately ornamented ; it had box-edgings and tiny many-coloured flower-beds, a spasmodic fountain, and two or three plaster figures. The owners were an elderly brother and sister—the former, managing clerk in a City warehouse—both patronised by Mrs. Crewe as 'good, well-meaning creatures, though not what you would call *gentry* ;' nevertheless, a source of comfort to the somewhat lonely widow, who found it a relief to talk about herself, her son, her affairs and former grandeur, to the little old maid, who looked somewhat enviously up to her as a brilliant woman of the world.

'There is a tide in the affairs of men ;' and in the inner life too there is a gathering of the waters at particular periods when events and emotions accumulate, and waves of joy or sorrow mount to a certain pitch, ebbing back after a while to the ordinary level of existence.

Such a pitch had been reached by Laura Piers and Winifrid Fielden when they appealed for help to the Admiral.

Hitherto theirs had been a tranquil, simple life, sheltered in a peaceful home, and looking up to father and uncle as the most charming and accomplished of men.

The Reverend Frederic Fielden had held for many years the small living of Cheddington, in one of the southern shires. He was a gentle, sociable, semi-artistic personage, exceedingly self-indulgent in an amiable manner, and afflicted with what his wife termed ‘a sensitive soul ;’ i.e. utter want of endurance, and an irresistible tendency to run away from everything disagreeable. Fortunately for him, he had a wife who guided while she adored him ; and Mrs. Fielden was resolute in her determination to hold fast the substance they possessed, at any rate till the boys were set forth in life. So she skilfully kept the family together on a wonderfully small amount, and gave her parson rope enough to disport himself mildly in town each year viewing the exhibitions, attending classical concerts, and hearing the most fashionable clerical orators, so rendering life bearable. But, in addition to her own flock, the parson’s good wife took a stray lamb into her pleasant fold.

One of Mr. Fielden’s sisters had married an officer, a quiet, thoughtful, promising young man. Captain Piers had little or nothing but his pay, nevertheless they enjoyed some three or four years of great happiness before fever, during an unhealthy season in the West Indies, cut them both off, leaving a baby-girl of about a year old.

Among the acquaintances formed by Captain Piers during his military career was Admiral Desbarres, and some especial sympathy drew them together. It was the Admiral who saw to the funeral of the young wife, and it was he also who soothed the last moments of the father by a solemn promise to look after the poor bereaved baby, and, if possible, to induce Mrs. Fielden to give the little creature house-room.

Mrs. Fielden was too motherly a woman to refuse this request, so little Laura became one of the family at the parsonage. The Admiral, thankful to have his helpless ward so well provided for, carefully nursed the few hundreds which was all the provision left for her, adding interest to

capital till, when she was old enough, he was able, with a little help from his own purse, to share with Mrs. Fielden the cost of a governess for the cousins ; for a little girl had appeared in the clerical nest about a year and a half after Laura had been lodged there.

Thus Laura Piers and Winifrid Fielden grew up like sisters, the former scarce knowing she was an orphan. She was petted and punished by her aunt ; snubbed, sent on messages, and occasionally told she was a trump by the eldest boy, who was rather a hero to both girls ; and decidedly a favourite with her uncle, as she grew to be useful to him at a wonderfully early age. For Laura, though not pleasing to the eye, like his own daughter, was a clever, thoughtful little thing, passionately fond of books, and careful and loving in her treatment of them.

In the group associated with those happy, tranquil early days the figure of Reginald Piers was prominent.

He was the favourite chum of Dick Fielden, the eldest son, and frequently a guest at the Rectory during the holidays ; for he was the only son of a widowed mother, whose means of affording pleasures or advantages to her boy were extremely limited, especially as she had in later years resided with a married daughter, who had made what was considered a 'splendid match.'

Reginald was a general favourite. He was a good cricketer, a successful angler, a tolerable shot, easy-going, and sufficiently vain to take pleasure in pleasing. As he was a little older than her own son, Mrs. Fielden treated him with an amount of confidence she never bestowed on Dick ; while Laura regarded him as an Admirable Crichton, and gloried in the slender degree of relationship he condescended to admit.

The last holidays spent by Reginald at the Rectory had had a peculiar charm for the Rector's orphan niece, as he had especially patronised her, trying his 'prentice hand' in the art of delicate attention ; for Reginald showed a decided predilection for young ladies, even at the risk of being called a 'muff' by his companions.

But the Rectory had seen its best days. The winter in which Laura attained her sixteenth and Winifrid her fourteenth year, Mrs. Fielden, never very strong, caught

a severe cold, which soon became bronchitis, and finally robbed the family of their best friend and firmest stay.

To Mr. Fielden the loss was irreparable. Cheddington became insupportable to him, and fancying he could, with the help of some small savings and the pursuit of literature, eke out existence on his infinitesimal income more agreeably on the Continent, he gave up his living, and, much against the advice of his eldest son, who had already made his first step in life—a considerable stride, as it carried him to Bombay—removed himself, his youngest boy, and the ‘dear girls’ to Dresden, where *they* could find educational advantages, and himself the repose his broken health and broken heart required.

Here they spent two very comfortable years: an English clergyman of good private means (so report endowed him), charming manners, artistic tastes, and interesting circumstances, was hailed as an acquisition by the Anglo-American colony in that social city. His occasional sermons, when health enabled him to lighten the labours of the over-worked chaplain, were universally admired, and altogether Mr. Fielden found the change from a rural parish to the Saxon capital answer remarkably well in every respect except financially.

He was indeed at times painfully surprised to find how rapidly money melted away, though food was moderate and amusements were cheap. To be sure, amusements never entered into the Cheddington budget; but at Dresden it was necessary that the ‘dear girls’ should attend the theatre to improve their knowledge of German, and the concerts to improve their taste for music, while it was impossible to accept the constant hospitality of compatriots without making some return; so the Rev. Mr. Fielden’s æsthetic teas became the rage, and his opinion on matters of taste was universally deferred to. Meantime his funds dwindled alarmingly, though he consoled himself by hoping that his book on ‘Historic and Artistic Dresden’ would put him straight, and then he would retire to some quiet nook in Switzerland, and practise strict economy till Herbert was fit to adopt a career.

The third year of their sojourn was not so pleasant. Laura, who was housekeeper, found it very difficult to get

the money requisite for daily needs. Herbert's school accounts remained unpaid. Whispers got about that the family in Christian Strasse were not flourishing as they did at first. Then both Laura and Winifrid perceived a great change in the tenderly cared-for father and uncle. He could not write, or talk, or amuse himself, as he used ; a low fever attacked him, and before he was thought in danger, he seemed in some mysterious way to give himself up, and died.

The suddenness of this event paralysed Winifrid, who was her father's idol ; she could only think of her bereavement. But Laura, on whom the rougher cares of their daily life always devolved, was, while truly grieved to lose so dear and kind a protector, also puzzled and terrified by the utter emptiness of the exchequer.

The Fieldens had never kept up much intercourse with their relatives ; and when the girls had written to an uncle in India, and an aunt who had married a merchant in Liverpool, they had no more to do but to sit with folded hands and wait what help the Admiral would bring.

As yet Laura knew him only by frequent gifts and rare visits, but she felt instinctively that he would not fail her. And when he came, what would be their destiny ? Should she have to separate from Winnie, who, though little more than two years her junior, was like her child ; and Herbert ! who would look after *him*, and keep him brushed and mended, and prepared for school ? In the midst of these sad conjectures, almost before they thought the Admiral could have received her letter, came a telegram to Laura from her guardian :—

'I will be with you the day after to-morrow. Refer all persons to me.'

CHAPTER III.

It was a disheartening task which the Admiral set himself, to disentangle the hopeless confusion of Mr. Fielden's affairs. He had left no will. He had many years previously insured his life, and paid the premiums with

regularity; but then it was found that he had borrowed upon it, so that what was left barely sufficed to clear the family credit in Dresden.

During the fortnight which succeeded Admiral Desbarres' arrival he said very little as to his intentions. He was at all times a man of few words, and those few were principally addressed to Laura, with whom he went over the books and accounts. He meanwhile cogitated his plans in silence. If he took these young people under his protection, he would arrange all things, and nothing save obedience would remain for them.

He was by conviction and training a despot—of the kindest and most benevolent description, but still a despot—all law, according to his belief, emanating from a Supreme Ruler. Family and social relations were but inner rings of the great circle, and ought to reproduce in miniature the same system of fatherly protection and childlike submission.

This silence was hard to Laura, although by nature patient and reasonable; but it was intolerable to Winnie, an eager, sanguine, warm-hearted creature—the beauty and pet of the family. ‘What is he going to do with us?’ she asked impatiently, one evening, nearly a fortnight after her fatlier's funeral, when the Admiral had taken Herbert to walk, and the two girls were left alone in the once pretty *salon*, which now looked so bare and desolate, as all the books and photographs and small ornaments had been packed up, and everything sold or made ready for their departure.

Winnie was a tall slender girl, with sloping shoulders and a pliant waist, carelessly graceful in every movement, with a clear though somewhat brown complexion, pale when in repose, but with a rich mantling colour that came and went when she was moved in any way, and was a means of expression second only to her large liquid eyes, which some thought deepest blue, and others darkest hazel, and which revealed every passing emotion. ‘What is he going to do with us, Laura? How I wish he would leave us here—we could live more cheaply than in London, and far, far more happily. I suppose we are to go to London?’

'I think so, though the Admiral has not said so positively.'

'If I am to do anything,' resumed Winnie, pushing back her rich wavy dark-brown hair—'to earn money, I mean—I would rather do it here, though I hate the idea of having to do it at all. How it would have broken my poor darling father's heart to think of such a thing! But I suppose I must, Laura?'

'We both must, dear Winnie. I cannot be dependent on my guardian, though he would not let me broach the subject, and told me to wait till he had laid his plans.'

'But I am not his ward. I have a right to choose; and I don't suppose he thinks of supporting *me*. Oh Laura, if he takes you away, what is to become of Herbert and me? Dick is not rich enough to have us with him in India. How maddening it is to be such a burden—yet what can I do? Oh, my father, my father!' and tears began to flow afresh.

'Dear, dear Winnie!' murmured Laura, holding back her own, though her lips quivered as she knelt down, and, putting her arms round her cousin's waist, laid her head on her lap. 'Try and have patience; we are so young and helpless, and the Admiral has always been so good and kind, what can we do but trust him and wait his time? Do not vex him by seeming restless or dissatisfied. He only tries to do what is best for us.'

'I dare say; but it is too bad not to be consulted. I declare I will ask him myself this evening—he always answers me.'

'Yes,' returned Laura, with a kindly smile, 'as usual you are a favourite;' and she rose and leant against the window, gazing sadly out over the garden, and inhaling the perfume of mignonette which was wafted from it.

Laura was less reluctant to quit Dresden than her cousin. She had been too seriously alarmed by the difficulties with which she had had to contend during the last eight or nine months to form such pleasant impressions as Winnie, who seldom troubled herself about anything, and in some vague way thought that breakfast, dinner, and supper were a spontaneous growth, which would always be ready for people in their position.

Laura did not resemble her cousin. She was not so tall as Winnie, and, though straight and well-made, was rather high-shouldered and square-looking. Her features were irregular; the jaw somewhat large, the mouth somewhat wide, though it could smile honestly, sweetly, and showed fine white teeth. Her complexion was sallow, her hair a dull brown, and her eyes, though well shaped, were of a pale gray with little brilliancy. Laura Piers was always considered a 'plain girl'; but she possessed a certain gentle composure of manner, a self-possession that was never cold, which made her presence soothing to irritable people, and acceptable to all.

Laura was by nature an artist—gifted with that marvellous power of sympathy which bestows upon the possessor almost 'second sight'; and with a love of beauty so deep and keen, that she never looked in the glass without a sigh to see how little she possessed of that precious dower.

Yet, though this regret might occasionally sadden, it never embittered—partly, perhaps, because she had been brought up in an atmosphere of kindness and genuine affection; partly because she had an inner consciousness that the joys of intellect could compensate for much.

'Yes! I will talk to him to-night,' continued Winnie. 'He is a dear. I am sure I do not know what would have become of us without him; but I don't like to be driven blindfold about the world, and I cannot part with you, Laura,' kissing her fondly. 'I never knew I loved you so much.'

A slight glow mounted to Laura's cheek, and her eyes shone through the tears that filled them as she pressed Winnie to her.

'I don't think the Admiral will do that—not willingly, I am sure; but we cannot yet know what will become of us.'

Winnie kept her word. Their usual supper was not quite over, when, with an effort for which she was angry with herself, she exclaimed, 'Dear Admiral Desbarres, Laura says we are going to leave on Monday. Would you mind telling where we are going—I mean in London?'

The Admiral looked at the speaker gravely; then an indulgent smile overspread his face.

'I think, Winifrid, you might trust me ; nevertheless, it is time you should be told, dear children, of my plans, so far as I can form them. For the present, I mean to place you with a lady whom I have known for many years—Mrs. Crewe, the widow of an old shipmate of mine—where I hope you can dwell in comfort, until I can ascertain what your aunt and brother can do to assist you. Should they be unable, or unwilling, believe me I will not desert you, Winnie.'

'You are ever so good and kind,' cried Winnie, flushing with mortification, while her eyes sparkled through her tears, 'but how dreadful it is to be—a beggar!'—the word was brought out with a sob. 'I must try and do something—I can teach German and music and—'

'For the present you must be guided by me,' interrupted the Admiral, in his slow deliberate tones. 'Hereafter we may arrange some such plan—for the present your youth and helplessness are a claim upon those who have the means to befriend you ; and these necessities, though painful, are but the expression of a law which emanates from One whose supreme will must not be resisted.'

'And I shall stay with Laura ?'

'I would never willingly separate you,' returned the Admiral kindly.

'Thank God for that !' cried Winnie. 'But I do hope this lady, this Mrs. Crewe, is not severe and—'

'I can only repeat that the charge of caring for you seems to have been given into my hands. I must therefore demand from you that submission which alone can enable me to fulfil the responsibilities I have undertaken. I will say good-night now, as I must write some letters before I go to bed.'

The hours slipped quickly by, and soon the last day came. Laura and Winnie escaped in the fresh early morning to look once more on the river with its smiling border of vineyards and trees up to where it makes a wide bend beneath the villa of the Prussian prince who gave up royalty for love.

The river sparkled in the tender early sunshine, the air was crisp with the youthfulness of spring, and both girls exclaimed that never before had the view of Dresden and

its old bridge, with the towers of the Hof-Kirch and Schloss, looked so lovely. They had crossed to the gardens of the Japanese Palace, after strolling along the Bruhlsche Terrasse, and looked long in silence on the old town which probably they would never see again ; then, with a mutual sudden impulse, a vivid flash of feeling that they had nothing left save each other, they exchanged a hearty kiss, which, without uttering a word, each felt as a pledge of loyalty and love.

And so they looked their last on Dresden.

The arrival of the Admiral's ward and her cousin was a great event for Mrs. Crewe. In the first place, it set her mind at ease on the momentous question of rent ; next, it raised her in her own esteem ; then the presence of two young ladies in the house promised cheerfulness and company, which latter was very dear to Mrs. Crewe's heart ; finally, it would be pleasant for 'Denzil' when he came home. Denzil was her son, the only survivor of several children. It need scarcely be said that Denzil was her idol, the one object that filled her life and satisfied her imagination. He was, unlike most idols, a good son ; a quiet, steady fellow, who from stress of circumstances had entered the merchant service instead of the royal navy, much to his mother's mortification.

'Collins' had a hard time of it from the day Mrs. Crewe received the Admiral's reply readily accepting the terms she proposed. Not only the apartments to be occupied by the young ladies, but every portion of the house had to be scoured, polished, and dusted ; and the life of the mild upstairs tenant, Mr. Jenkins, was made a burden to him by the disarrangement of his belongings in this tremendous cleaning.

Everything was in order by the time the travellers arrived. Flowers in the vases, and fresh antimacassars bristling with starch adorned the drawing-room, while an excellent luncheon was laid out in the little dining-room.

'I am sure, my dears, you are welcome to what I trust you will consider as your home,' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, with a delightful mixture of dignity and cordiality, as she stood at the front door to receive her new inmates, who looked weary enough with their dusty black dresses and white

faces. ‘Miss Piers, I presume,’ smiling upon Winnie, who happened to come first.

‘No! I am Winnie Fielden.’

‘Oh! I am truly glad to see you; and this is your brother, Miss Fielden, dear fellow! I love all boys for the sake of my own! Come in; you must be so dreadfully tired. How many hours have you been *en route*—thirty-eight? dreadful!—had you a tolerable passage?’

‘Horrible!’ exclaimed Laura, with a shudder, as they followed their hostess upstairs.

‘Poor Laura was dreadfully ill,’ said Winnie, with a slight smile, ‘but I rather liked crossing; I stayed very late on deck with the Admiral.’

‘Well, there is your room—very simple, as you see, but I trust homelike and comfortable. Pray ring for anything you may want, for I must leave you—I have not spoken to the Admiral yet.’

She swept away to meet the general benefactor, and express to him her gratitude, her satisfaction, her admiration of these ‘charming girls,’ who, at the first glance, she saw would be an ‘acquisition to any family.’

But the profound gentle composure of the Admiral quenched in an indefinable way the fire of Mrs. Crewe’s eloquence, and she was soon listening to him in silence, as in a few clear sentences he thanked her for the help she had afforded him, by receiving the young people on such moderate terms.

‘I trust my own ward will remain with you permanently; as to Miss Fielden, I do not know what her brother or other relations may wish to do for her; but at any rate it is a great relief to place both girls, for the present, with you. You know how I am situated. Having made a home with my invalid sister, I can neither leave her nor introduce any disturbing element into our house; and youth, however amiable, must be disturbing.’

Then Mrs. Crewe ventured to touch on her own affairs, and tell how her son Denzil had sailed as chief officer in one of Duncan’s ships, how he had contrived to save enough to share a venture of merchandise on his own account, besides helping herself to pay the last instalment of her debt to her listener, ‘which I have ready for you, my dear

sir, in a purse of my own netting,' she concluded ; 'and this is all I can pay of the immense obligation I owe you—in fact, my present independence ; for though it was a struggle, I do make both ends meet in this house ; and with your ward—'

But the entrance of the girls, quickly followed by Herbert, checked her speech, and relieved the Admiral from the necessity of a reply.

And now Mrs. Crewe was in her element, conscious of having on her best black silk, her choicest cap, her watch, and her *chatelaine*, crowded with charms and trinkets, the crown jewel to which she had tenaciously clung through many a bitter day of despondency and privation. She had a bland delight in patronising these 'elegant girls,' and the boy who, though 'not good-looking, had a charming countenance.' Herbert was a very ugly likeness of his handsome sister, with a wide mouth, limp, straight, straw-coloured hair, and a dirty-looking complexion. He was tall for his age, but stooped awkwardly, and, with huge hands and feet and ill-cut German clothes, was anything but attractive. Both Winnie and her brother were honestly hungry, but Laura could not eat ; she was therefore the object of much persecution. 'My dear Miss Piers, you take nothing ; let me give you the least bit of this veal and ham pie, with a little jelly and a morsel of egg. My cook is rather remarkable for her meat pies—it distresses me to see you unable to eat.'

'The tea is so nice, it will do me good ; I shall be better presently,' murmured poor Laura, whose head ached terribly.

'How nice it is to see an English breakfast-table, so bright and clean !' cried Winnie. 'Though I am very fond of Germany, there is no place like England for niceties.'

'I am charmed to hear you say so,' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe radiantly ; 'I feared you would think but little of my humble cottage after foreign grandeur. But this is really a very convenient house and a most improving neighbourhood. The White Hart omnibuses now come to the end of the street, and you see we have a nice garden at the back !'

'It is an exceedingly suitable abode,' remarked the Admiral, 'and does credit to its owner.'

'You flatter me, my dear sir! but, indeed, if there is one thing more than another on which I pique myself, it is order—order and cleanliness!—and no words can tell the difficulties of maintaining either with ignorant, self-willed servants. Really, with these new-fangled notions about education, and women's rights, and all that, it is almost impossible to keep house!'

'We are terribly in need of that most excellent virtue, obedience, in these latter days,' said the Admiral thoughtfully. 'Few think of the help they can give to government by submission, instead of rebelling and finding fault.'

'Quite true,' replied Mrs. Crewe; 'but your young friends must not suppose that I am a dragon of severity; on the contrary, I like a cheerful home and freedom for every one: and though I have but few acquaintances (indeed, there are not many of my own rank of life around me), I trust we shall not be dull. By the by, young ladies, I have not introduced you to a very important member of the family;' and Mrs. Crewe rose, and walking to the little sofa, took up the cat, which was sleeping there in profound repose, regardless of the smart red ribbon with which she was decorated in honour of the day.

'This is my sweet Toppy, Miss Piers—is she not a beauty, Miss Fielden? Remember' (to Herbert), 'whatever pranks you may play, I will never forgive any against Toppy. Is she not beautifully marked? and such a lovely tail! Do you know, an old friend of mine, Major St. George, told me that his sister, the Countess of Achill, would give twenty pounds for such a cat (she is a great cat-fancier); but no twenty pounds would buy *my* Toppy!'—kissing the creature, who winked with preternatural gravity.

'She is very pretty,' said Laura, stroking it gently.

'Very pretty,' echoed Winnie, without, however, touching it.

'It is curious to study the nature of animals,' remarked the Admiral, patting its head; but the moment he touched its fur, puss gave a sudden, sharp, vicious mew, and struggled to get away.

'How very extraordinary!' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe: 'I

never knew Toppy behave so badly ; she is generally the gentlest and most amiable of cats.'

Meantime, unseen by any one, Winnie gave Herbert a warning look, while Mrs. Crewe deposited Toppy on the sofa and returned to the table. A little more conversation, intermittent and slightly forced, ensued, and then the Admiral rose.

'I shall now leave you,' he said, 'to make each other's acquaintance. To-morrow afternoon I hope to call and to have favourable letters for you, my dear,' to Winnie. 'I shall be as usual at the "Burlington," and shall remain about a week in town. Good morning, Mrs. Crewe ; I feel happy in leaving my young charges under your care. God bless you, dear children, and direct you in this beginning of a new life.'

Laura, always self-controlled, only pressed his hand, while she murmured, 'How can we thank you enough !' But Winnie suddenly threw her arms round his neck and kissed his cheek.

'You will be sure to come to-morrow, will you not ?' she whispered.

'Yes, Winifrid, without fail,' said the Admiral emphatically, while he tenderly returned her embrace. 'Be of good cheer,' he added kindly, as he shook hands with Herbert ; 'for young creatures like you there is many a bright day in store behind the sad present ; only keep a clear conscience before Heaven, and all things will work together for your good.'

'I am sure,' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, after he had gone 'if ever there was a thorough gentleman and a true Christian, it is Admiral Desbarres ! He is a saint upon earth, though one always thinks of a saint in a long woollen gown with a rope round his waist, whereas the Admiral is always so well dressed—which shows that true religion need not interfere with the elegancies of life ! My dear girls, you must cheer up ; I will do my very best to make you happy ! look upon me as a mother.'

She embraced one girl after the other, but Herbert dodged and made a snatch at her hand.

'And now, would you like to lie down and rest a while ? You must be quite worn out !'

'Thank you,' said Laura ; 'I think I should like to put our things a little in order, and then I will try to sleep.'

'Do so, dear Laura. I am not going to call you by your surname any more ; we must be at home with each other.'

'Certainly, Mrs. Crewe.'

'And you, Master Herbert ?'

'Well,' replied that young gentleman, 'I should like to go out and take a stroll, just to see what the place is like.'

'Very well, Herbert ; only do not lose your way, my boy.'

'If I do, I speak the language, you know,' he said coolly ; and as the cousins ascended the stairs they heard the front-door shut after Herbert, while Mrs. Crewe was calling in audible tones, 'Collins ! Collins ! come and clear away the breakfast things ! Now don't delay ; there's plenty to do !'

On reaching their own room, Laura locked the door, and, sitting down beside the dressing-table, bent her elbows upon it, covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears.

'Dear Laura !' cried Winnie, putting her arms round her and looking dismayed—for she was more accustomed to receive than to administer consolation—'what is the matter ? Do you feel very ill ?'

'What is the matter ?' repeated Laura, with a sob ; 'there is plenty the matter, I think ! I don't know how it is, but it suddenly seems so awful to be here, away from every one we ever knew. If we had been left at dear Cheddington, the good Squire and his wife, and the Doctor, and every one would have been old friends and helped us ; and at Dresden there was the Gräfin and the Macdonalds, all so kind ; but here——' an expressive pause.

'Oh yes, it is dreadful ; but then Mrs. Crewe seems very good and pleasant—much better than I expected.'

'Yes, she is nice, and I think I am quite overtired. I shall just unpack the box, and then I will lie down.'

'It is rather bare,' observed Winnie, looking round the room with a dissatisfied expression ; 'yet I do not see how there would be room for anything more. I don't know how you will contrive to be tidy *here*, Laura.'

'Oh, we must be doubly tidy, or it will be intolerable,' said Laura, drying her eyes; 'and it is the only place we can have to ourselves, for we can scarcely write or paint or do anything downstairs, I suppose.'

'When the rest of our things come, where in the world shall we put them?' asked Winnie, standing in the middle of the room, her hands folded, and her eyes wide open with a puzzled expression.

'Oh, I daresay there is a box-room or some such place. Come and help me, like a dear girl—you look so distracted standing there! I feel better already from doing something,' returned Laura.

'And I feel as if I should never care to do anything again,' cried Winnie, suddenly dropping on her knees and beginning to pull out the contents of the box vehemently. 'To think that I shall never, never hear his dear voice, nor see him smile as he used when I had a pretty new hat, or anything that suited me; and my father was not old, Laura—not quite sixty-one. I sometimes feel so angry with myself, because I forget for a few minutes, and am amused. Why, I could have burst out laughing to-day when Mrs. Crewe was praising the cat, and Herbert pinched its tail and made it almost bite that angel of an Admiral. But Mrs. Crewe is *great* fun: she is so aristocratic; still, I am a shade less miserable since I saw her. Oh, Laura! is it not contemptible to change about as I do?'

'I don't know,' said Laura sadly. 'You can't help your nature, and anything is better than pretending to be what you are not; besides, if one was *always* so wretched as one is at moments, one would go mad or die.'

'That's true,' ejaculated Winnie. After a short silence, she rose from her knees and went to one of the windows. 'It is rather a nice little street; all the houses have gardens in front, and trees, but they are very small and low; and'—turning to the dressing-table, unsteady, but elegantly draped with muslin and pink lining—'what an awful glass! my face looks absolutely green, and quite stumpy; and did you ever see such a marvel of darns as the piece of carpet!'

'I am afraid Mrs. Crewe is not much better off than

ourselves,' returned Laura, looking round with a slight, not unkindly smile; 'but everything is very clean, and she has given us a friendly welcome. Dear Winnie, I have put things a little in their places, and I feel I must lie down.'

'And as I am not a bit tired,' said Winnie, 'I will write to Elise von Eichwald while you rest; we promised to let her know all about our journey.'

'And Mrs. Macdonald too—do not forget her,' murmured Laura, laying her weary head on the pillow.

CHAPTER IV.

THE day after Mrs. Crewe's new inmates had arrived there was an entertainment at Mr. Trent's handsome residence in Cleveland Square. It was not a solemn festivity, such as he felt it his duty to hold three or four times in the season, to which were bidden chiefly professional equals and some of his leading counsel. This was more of a family affair. Yet it included a baronet of ancient lineage, a banker of high repute, a distinguished Indian officer, and a man of good position among the landed gentry, with ladies to match, besides one unmated China merchant with several lacs, and a liver.

Mr. Trent was a good specimen of a prosperous professional man. He was an honourable man, with a decently good temper and a circulation not too rapid, who had never meddled with things 'common or unclean.' Yet he had committed the incongruity of making what was considered a love-match—that is, he had married the daughter of a rising barrister into whose company he was thrown a good deal by business; but the barrister died before he achieved fortune, and the family were scattered.

Mrs. Trent, *née* Piers, was a handsome blonde inclined to 'embonpoint,' with a bright face and pleasant manners, frank, laughter-loving, and intelligent. Mr. Trent was quite satisfied with his bargain, but never hesitated to express, in sharp, decisive sentences, any disapprobation suggested by domestic arrangements or expenses, though far too sensible a man to be a niggard.

Still, with all his mental breadth, he could not shake off the influence of his training and associations, and it was with a sense of satisfaction that he descended from his dressing-room on the evening in question.

On opening the drawing-room door he found Mrs. Trent showing the last photographs of her two youngest children to her brother and sister-in-law, Major and Mrs. John Piers.

'I thought it was to be quite a family party,' said Mrs. Piers, looking with some dismay at her hostess's dress of creamy white muslin and lace, with turquoise and diamonds at her throat, and fastening a coquettish tuft of blue ribbon in her hair, from which floated lace lappets.

'So it is, if five of one family can make it so. My principal security against completing the characteristics of such an assembly is, that we are too great strangers to have any *casus belli*; a general fight is the usual ending when two or three of the same blood are gathered together,' returned Mrs. Trent, laughing.

'Dear me!' said her sister-in-law, with a look of dismay; she was a simple little thing, familiar only with Indian society. 'You see, I thought that we should probably only meet that young Piers—I forget his name, who dined here last autumn when we first arrived—and your own party; so I put on my black silk, which is scarcely a dinner dress.'

'I am sure it is a very pretty one, and that point d'Alençon is exquisite: it is my favourite lace.'

'Yes, it is very nice; I bought it in Paris when we were there last month. Now tell me who are coming?'

'Well, first of all there is Reginald Piers, who has become quite somebody since you met him—come into a fortune unexpectedly; his mother, a very charming person, and his sister, Lady Jervois, who was a beauty, but has gone off terribly; her husband, Sir Gilbert, who is—well, *not* charming. Then there is the Trent cousin, Mr. Cannon, and his wife; and our respected partner, Mr. Thurston, who is devoted to *me*, I flatter myself. And oh, a Mr. Matthews, a man from China—that's all, I think.'

'And your daughter?' looking over to a slight, ladylike, rather pretty girl, well-dressed, *coiffée*, *gantée*, and generally well put out of hand, to whom her father and Major Piers were talking affably.

'Yes ; Katie dines with us to-day, as it is not a state dinner.'

Further comments were cut short by the announcement of Mr. and Mrs. Thurston, followed by the remaining guests, ending with Sir Gilbert and Lady Jervois and Mrs. Piers ; whereupon entered a scrubby little man in an evening suit of some antiquity both as to cut and aspect. He had an upturned nose, stubbly whiskers, and a slightly bald head, while his wide and somewhat loose-lipped mouth wore a perpetual grin of conceit and satisfaction. On his arm leant an elderly lady with silvery-gray hair, arranged in soft feathery curls on each side of her pale aristocratic face, and crowned by a graceful cap of rare white lace ; wearing a dress of rich black silk, much trimmed with lace, and carrying a large Spanish feather fan.

Lady Jervois followed—a slight, graceful little woman, with a shy, anxious expression in her large blue eyes.

Mrs. Trent met them half-way from the door with a pleasant greeting.

'Very happy to see you, Mrs. Piers,' she said ; 'I was but a little girl when we last met, yet I am sure I should have known you again.'

'I can scarcely say as much,' returned the lady, smiling ; 'but at your age change is for the better.'

'And you, Sir Gilbert ! you have been a stranger to London for some time.'

'You see, I have had no parliamentary humbug to call me from my preserves and farming, so I've been deuced glad to stick to the plough and the gun,' replied Sir Gilbert, with a quick, harsh laugh.

'Mrs. Piers, Lady Jervois, let me introduce my brother, a cousin you have never met before ;' then glancing round, Mrs. Trent perceived that the tale of her guests was not complete.

'Where is Reginald ?' she asked. 'I thought he would come with you,' to Mrs. Piers.

'I have not seen him since yesterday. He is staying at the Langham, and we have taken a house in Mount Street, you know ; but he will be here without fail.'

'Changed times for Master Reggie,' interrupted Sir Gilbert, with a chuckle ; 'from a clerk to a county magnate.'

'Magnate or no, we must not spoil our dinner for him,' said Mrs. Trent. 'Pray ring, Mr. Thurston.'

The *convives* had, however, scarce taken their places when the tardy guest arrived.

'Ah, Reginald!' said Mrs. Trent, as he came quickly up the room to shake hands with her; 'you see you have not yet acquired importance enough to be waited for.'

Mrs. Trent, with her candid manner and pleasant ways, managed to colour the familiarity, which once was slightly patronising, with a tinge of elder sisterly partiality, that did not suggest, even to self-love as sensitive as Reginald's, a suspicion that she was influenced by his change of fortune.

'I am afraid you have been going to too many festive scenes—you look tired.'

'No! I assure you my invitations are not too numerous,' said Reginald, going round to his place and shaking hands with his mother and Mr. Trent as he passed.

'Oh, they'll come fast enough, as your merits become known,' said Sir Gilbert with a grin.

And while a dropping fire of question and answer ran round the table, Mrs. Trent thought that Reginald looked altogether less radiant than when he had last dined with them, before going down to Saltshire to go through the pleasant process of 'taking possession.'

'I suppose you don't care to visit the old shop even as our "respected client"?' said Mr. Trent, smiling.

'No—yes,' returned Reginald, hesitating slightly, while his colour deepened. 'That is'—with a smile—"I have really very pleasant recollections of my office days, but somehow time slips away so fast, and so many fresh engagements turn up, that I seem to have no more time to myself than when I belonged to the famous firm. I daresay'—turning to Miss Trent—"you too find, now that you are emancipated, that you have quite as much to do as when you were enslaved?—eh, Katie?—I suppose I may call you Katie, as you are not absolutely out?'

'Oh yes, if you like,' said Miss Trent, blushing.

'Are you to burst on a dazzled world next spring? I think we ought to get up a Christmas party and a ball at Pierslynn this winter.'

'That would be very nice,' she said, colouring with pleasure, though a little confused by his notice.

'No, no fowl, but bring me another slice of mutton,' said Sir Gilbert to his hostess. 'You are a sensible woman, Mrs. Trent, to give us mutton; one loathes lamb at this season of the year. By George! we have had lamb at every house we have dined at since we came to town. Not that we are overwhelmed with engagements; it's amazing how soon one drops out of one's set in London! The fellows at the Club who can remember me cry out, "Jervois, where the deuce have you come from?" as if I had no business to be alive!'

'Yes! It takes a great deal to make a lasting impression on London society,' returned Mrs. Trent. 'I am flattered that you approve of my mutton. I feel inclined to hide your plate from Mr. Trent with my fan; he considers mutton and jelly dangerously unorthodox at this season. But of course a lawyer is a good deal ruled by precedent.'

Sir Gilbert turned his light cunning eyes approvingly on his hostess.

'Mr. Trent, like most of his trade, knows how to pick out the plums in more ways than one,' he said.

'I wish he were a good boy from the Jack Horner point of view,' said Mrs. Trent, laughing. 'But I fear he is not a sharp enough practitioner; I fancy you have dexterous thumbs yourself, Sir Gilbert!'

'Not I, by George! I don't think I have made many hits in my life. Look at the luck of that young Piers! But he will make ducks and drakes of it all: "Set a beggar on horseback," hey?'

'I don't think so. He seems steady enough, and I am sure has behaved very sensibly ever since he came into the estate.'

'Ah! but he comes of a spendthrift lot. I know 'em. I've got my lady into pretty good training, but I wish you were to see Madame Piers there, trotting off to the Bond Street shops to rig herself out as the Dowager of Pierslynn! However, it's no affair of mine; Master Reggie will find out that ^{fifteen} thousand a year is not Fortunatus's purse by and by.'

Gilbert was a remarkably outspoken man. He was

too thick-skinned to feel pricks himself, and consequently never hesitated to inflict them on his neighbours.

'Mrs. Piers has been an excellent mother,' said Mrs. Trent gravely, 'and she has had rather a hard life of it. I am glad Reginald appears so considerate of her.'

'A hard life! Gad, that's good!' cried Sir Gilbert, helping himself to devilled whitebait. 'Considering she has lived on the fat of the land at Ashley Grange for the last seven or eight years, with nothing to do but to bother me for clothes for the poor, and soup-kitchens, and the Lord knows what, pauperising my people and—'

'Is Lord Langford likely to succeed in the representation of your county, Sir Gilbert?' asked Mr. Thurston, interrupting the Baronet's domestic revelations.

'I don't know, Mr. Thurston, and I don't care,' he returned. 'I have washed my hands of politics. They don't pay in any sense. It is all very well for adventurers—fellows that have to push their way—to make stepping-stones of the Conservative interest or Liberal principles; but I find enough to do to manage matters at home.'

'It is well that all country gentlemen are not of your way of thinking,' said Reginald. 'I confess I should like a seat in Parliament by and by.'

'I daresay you would; and to run a horse at Epsom, and keep a yacht at Cowes, and all the rest of it.'

'Political influence is a proper object of ambition,' said the Banker, who had scarcely spoken, 'and men of weight and property should not let it slip into the hands of men of straw.'

'Admiral Desbarres called after you left,' resumed Mr. Thurston, addressing his partner. 'He arrived from Germany yesterday, and has brought back his ward and her cousins.'

'I am afraid the Admiral is taking up a burden that will break his back,' returned the host.

'Who is Admiral Desbarres?' asked Lady Jervois in a soft timid voice. 'I seem to know the name.'

'He is one of the famous naval family of Desbarres. He has two brothers in the Navy; one, his junior, has only just retired, and is also an admiral: our friend, Admiral George Desbarres, is a man of extraordinary

benevolence. He is by no means wealthy; nevertheless, he is always helping some one, and now he is going to adopt his ward because she has lost her home, and her cousins, because——well, I suppose because no one else will.'

'Hum! he will land himself in the workhouse, and I shall be curious to see which of his *protégés* will take him out!' said Sir Gilbert.

'He is a fine old fellow,' cried Reginald, 'and desperately religious. I remember Mr. Fielden telling us at Cheddington that at one time he thought the Church of England too slow, and joined the Ranters, or the "Latter-day Saints," or some very fast sect.'

'My dear Reginald,' said his mother entreatingly, 'pray do not speak so flippantly on such subjects.'

'Where has he placed Laura and the children?' asked Reginald, with some interest.

'Somewhere in the Westbourne district. I do not know exactly.'

'This ward of Admiral Desbarres is a sort of distant relation of ours,' continued Reginald, turning to his right-hand neighbour, Mrs. John Piers. 'And I used to know her in our boy-and-girl days, for I frequently spent my vacations at her uncle's house.'

'Dear me, that was very nice!' returned the lady; 'is she pretty?'

'No, certainly not pretty, but a deuced clever girl; quite a "comrade," you understand, though she was not so plucky as her cousin, little Winnie Fielden.'

'I think my father, General Carden, used to know an Admiral Desbarres,' said Mrs. John Piers, blushing a little at drawing attention to herself, yet not sorry to parade her father the General.

'It was Admiral Stephen Desbarres,' remarked her husband.

Meantime the Banker and Mr. Thurston talked finance, and Major Piers laid down the law on Indian affairs to Reginald, who seemed to listen, but was somewhat pre-occupied; then Mrs. Trent gave the signal for retiring.

Reginald was the first to join the ladies. Lady Jervois was sitting alone, turning over the pages of a gorgeously

got-up book of Tyrolese scenery, with an expectant look on her sad, nervous little face.

Reginald went straight to her.

'I could not manage to call before one, Helen,' he said in a low voice, as he drew a chair beside her, 'but I have not forgotten my promise. Have you a pocket under all that lace?'

'Yes, dear Reggie,' she replied, with a slight quiver in her voice.

'Here, then, put this away before he comes up;' and he took a large thick envelope from his breast and passed it to her.

A quick, partly suppressed sob swelled her throat, as she seized the packet with nervous haste.

'Keep yourself better in hand, Helen,' he went on in a low warning tone. 'Will this put you straight?'

'Yes, quite! You have given me life, Reginald!'

'Then for Heaven's sake *keep* straight! I cannot do this again;' and Reginald's good-looking face contracted with an expression which it rarely wore.

'Trust me, I can and will keep right. I shall be able to endure now to the end, and if ever in any way I can repay—'

'I am very sure you will,' interrupted Reginald pleasantly. 'I will give you an opportunity some day, perhaps.'

There was a pause, and the packet having been successfully hidden away, Reginald pushed back his chair a little, and resumed:

'What have you been doing since yesterday? What has my mother decided?'

'Oh, she has nearly made up her mind to take that house at South Kensington. Sir Gilbert is anxious she should. He thinks, as it is so near the Museum, it would be very nice for us—Sybil and myself—to come up for a few months every year—for her education, you know.'

'I daresay he does,' returned Reginald with a scornful smile, 'even if he shares expenses, which I shall take care he does; it will be a deuced good arrangement for him.'

'And what a charming one for us!' returned Lady Jervois, her face brightening up at the prospect.

'Poor little Nellie! You have had an awful hard time

of it,' said Reginald compassionately. 'It may be better for you, now that I am able to play the part of your "big brother." But whatever you do, keep free of debt.. It would give *him* such a pull over you, if he found it out; and remember, I shall have heaps of claims—claims you know nothing about—on my spare cash ; I cannot help you again.'

'Believe me, I shall not require help,' said Lady Jervois in a low, earnest voice. 'And oh, if I could convey to you an idea of the relief you have given me ! God bless you, Reggie !'

'There ! there !' he returned, pressing her hand hastily. 'Don't lose hold of yourself ; perhaps you'll bring me luck. I will come and see you to-morrow. I want you to come to Pierslynn for a fortnight or three weeks. I hear Sir Gilbert is going to have an economical debauch in Paris among the Palais Royal restaurants—dinners at a franc seventy-five, and fifteen centime excursions on the imperial of the Passy trams ; so you and my mother had better come and stay with me.'

'It would be very nice. But, Reggie, you need not be so witty at Sir Gilbert's expense ; remember, you have spent a good many weeks at Ashley Grange, and had many a day's ride.'

'Quite true, Helen. If he hadn't spoilt your life I would spare him ; but—'

'Reginald,' said Mrs. Trent, interrupting them, 'you are really a good-for-nothing boy, never to have been to see me since you were at Pierslynn. I wanted to hear all about the place.'

'I daresay I have seemed negligent, Mrs. Trent, but you don't know what a heap of business I have had to attend to.'

'Business! Why, Mr. Trent says you have not appeared at the office either.'

'No ; of course I have had a good deal to do with Fairfield and Thwaites, the Pierslynn solicitors.'

'Oh, indeed !' returned Mrs. Trent, making a mental note of his answer ; 'well, tell me all about it—your castle and broad domains.'

'You must come and see for yourself, Mrs. Trent. I

think you will like the place—it is a rambling old house, not at all grand, but comfortable and rather picturesque. There is, they tell me, a good neighbourhood, and I must say the stables filled me with keen delight. I am quite impatient to return to them.'

'That is all very nice. And tell me, Reginald, is the house in good order? and what are you going to do about an establishment?'

'Oh, I found a stately old dame in black silk with a huge bunch of keys, and an elderly gentleman of clerical aspect, to whom the place seemed to belong much more than to me, both looking very glum; so, as everything was in apple-pie order, I made them a speech, requesting they would remain, and serve me as well as they appeared to have done my predecessor.'

Mr. Thurston, Sir Gilbert, Mr. Cannon, and Major Piers sat down to whist, and so postponed the hour of departure considerably beyond the usual time of breaking up; when Sir Gilbert rose from the card-table joyous and triumphant, the happy winner of four shillings and sixpence.

Some time previously, however, Reginald had made his excuses and taken leave.

'We are going to have another and more welcome change in the office,' said Mr. Trent, accompanying him to the door. 'Holden tendered his resignation to-day. He wants to join some relative in New Zealand or Sydney. He was useful in some respects, but latterly he grew very unsteady. I fear we should have had to dismiss him, which would have been unpleasant. It is as well he should take the initiative.'

'It is,' returned Reginald; 'and he will be no great loss. Good-night. I shall call on you the day after tomorrow to discuss one or two matters.'

CHAPTER V.

MRS. CREWE's happy and contented mood suffered no diminution during the first week of her new inmates' residence. The girls were perhaps a little too silent for their

hostess's taste; still, she made large allowance for her young guests' depressing circumstances, and did not doubt that after a while they would 'put every confidence in her.'

After the Rectory, with its roomy old house and numerous outbuildings, and even the Dresden *étagé*—which, if more limited, had exterior compensations in the shape of studios, galleries, and museums, where the cousins might ramble together unquestioned and unmolested—life seemed curiously crippled and confined in Mrs. Crewe's suburban semi-detached villa.

Moreover, the neat, well-kept surroundings, trim gardens, and orderly white-muslin-curtained windows, bright brass handles, and general uniformity of the neighbourhood, produced a sense of extreme weariness, when, after an elaborate toilette, Mrs. Crewe took the girls for 'a walk abroad.'

'I wonder if every day is to be the same. Laura?' exclaimed Winnie one morning. 'I feel hopelessly idle, as if I never could take to anything again! And where in the world could you paint?—there is no room here; and Mrs. Crewe is so terribly afraid of things being spoiled downstairs, that I do not see how you are to manage it. Then there are scarcely any books in the house, and the whole thing is so hopelessly commonplace; one cannot mend clothes every day and all day long. I do hope the Admiral will call to-day. Come in!' exclaimed Winnie; whereupon the door opened, and Mrs. Crewe sailed into the room, her favourite cat resting on her shoulder, and a letter in her hand.

'Well, my dears! I hope you are getting your things straight. Here, Winnie, is a letter from the dear Admiral—no mistaking his remarkable writing—so clear and even.'

'Oh, thank you, Mrs. Crewe!' cried Winnie, catching and opening it eagerly, while Mrs. Crewe continued to talk. 'I see you are very orderly, Laura. Would you like to have that large box put away? I have a nice box-room upstairs.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Crewe. It is very useful to keep things in.'

'Ah! I see. But I am going to get you another large

chest of drawers and a table. The room is bare at present; but the notice was short, and between you and me and my precious Toppy here, cash was *not* plentiful at the moment, or I should have made things nicer.'

'But these are very nice,' said Laura quickly. 'Won't you sit down, Mrs. Crewe?'

'Thank you, dear,' settling herself for a gossip. 'I have never brought Toppy to see you since you came. Look, my sweet! look at Laura's room! look at yourself in the glass.' The creature deliberately jumped down and began to inspect the apartment. 'It is the dearest, most companionable puss in the world. You will grow quite fond of her by and by. And now, dear,' continued Mrs. Crewe, 'let me see some of your German fashions. I confess I am always interested in dress, especially for nice young girls like yourselves.'

'But we have brought very little with us,' returned Laura. 'Winnie and I had only one mourning costume each. We made up these,' touching her skirt, 'out of some black dresses we had; German fashions are only French ones grown old.'

'Did you make those yourselves?' asked Mrs. Crewe, eyeing them critically. 'Very nicely made indeed; but, as you say, a little old-fashioned. Why do you wear that black frill round your throat, my dear? How much better Miss Fielden looks with a white one.'

'Oh! because it lasts longer,' said Laura good-humouredly, 'and there is no use taking too much trouble about *my* looks.'

'The Admiral desires his compliments to you, Mrs. Crewe,' interrupted Winnie, who had come to the end of her letters, for there was one enclosed. 'He hopes you will allow him to come to tea, as he is engaged all to-day. I have a letter, too, from my aunt in Liverpool, Mrs. Morgan—and, Laura, she asks me to go and stay with her! It is very kind, but—oh, I do hope I may not be obliged to go! She is quite a stranger, and then I shall want heaps of things!'

'Of course, I shall be charmed to see my esteemed friend, Admiral Desbarres,' said Mrs. Crewe in her best tone. Then, with a little more eagerness, 'Your aunt in Liverpool—who is she?'

'Mamma's sister. I have only seen her once or twice, and did not like her much; but I daresay she is very good, and I believe her husband is very rich.'

'Well, she is decidedly friendly, and you should not be too ready to reject what may prove an advantageous offer, my love! You will excuse my speaking; but I can truly say I feel a mother's interest in you both, not only for the Admiral's sake, but for your own. I would not refuse if I were you; but of course you will be guided by what the Admiral says. Just look at that dear Toppy; she has settled herself to sleep in the crown of your hat! she will not do it any harm, she is so gentle.'

'Oh, never mind,' said Winnie, making a slight grimace at Laura behind the speaker.

'And now let us consult,' resumed Mrs. Crewe, 'I am, though I say it myself, an excellent manager. Let us see, what would you require to make a good appearance at the table of these wealthy relatives? Another dress, more fashionably made and trimmed with crape. I daresay I could manage to get you a very pretty costume for four pounds.'

'Four pounds!' echoed Winnie, in despairing accents.

'And then,' continued Mrs. Crewe, evidently enjoying the prospect of buying and bargaining, 'you *might* do without another hat, though you *ought* to have one; and you'll not mind my mentioning it?—but you must have a pair of boots. Then, a mantle and a dinner-dress—in such a house as your aunt's—you *must* have a dinner-dress; fortunately, in mourning one does not want a variety.'

'Oh, there is nothing fortunate about mourning,' said Winnie, shaking her head.

'Then there are gloves and ribbons and things. I am sure for twelve pounds I could supply you well with all necessaries,' continued Mrs. Crewe, not heeding the interruption. 'Just let me see what you have already; you needn't mind me, my dears; my interest in you is sincere!' A little unwillingly, yet reluctant to seem unfriendly, Laura and Winnie submitted to a rigorous search; and amid admiring ejaculations and high-pitched queries, Mrs. Crewe managed to extract the price and history of every article they possessed. 'That is a beautiful portrait of

your father, Laura,' she said, looking at a clever sketch in water-colour. 'In his uniform, too! It would look very nice in the drawing-room, and might be a comfort to you, my dear. It is a pretty frame, too.'

'Yes, it is very nice,' said Laura, quietly taking it out of her hands and wrapping it up again in its paper. 'Uncle Fielden said it was very like. *I* cannot remember: Uncle and Aunt Fielden were my real father and mother.'

'And I am sure they loved you as if they were,' cried Winnie, with a sudden increase of colour.

'Well, dears, it is nearly one o'clock,' said Mrs. Crewe. 'I must change my dress before dinner, so I shall leave you. Trust me, I shall represent what you require in a proper manner to the Admiral, and he will act—as he always does—handsomely.'

'Indeed, indeed, you must do no such thing!' exclaimed Winnie. 'I have no claim whatever on him; I am not even his ward; and I should never dream of asking him for anything.'

'Well, we'll see,' returned Mrs. Crewe, smiling as she opened the door. 'Laura, my dear, what does the Admiral like with his tea? I did think of pressed beef, but it is scarcely enough; a little pickled salmon would be just the thing, only there is no time. I am giving you a fore-quarter of lamb and peas for dinner to-day, to be cold to-morrow, as it is the girl's Sunday out.'

'I am sure I do not know what the Admiral likes, Mrs. Crewe. I do not think he cares for anything.'

'Oh, every one has his likings, only it takes some time to find them out. Dinner will be ready in about twenty minutes;' and with a kindly patronising nod, Mrs. Crewe went out and shut the door.

'I am *so* glad she is gone!' cried Winnie, seizing Laura somewhat violently by the shoulders and forcing her into a chair. 'I have been just dying to show you this letter. I don't like it; and there is one part that might offend you as it has offended me; it is so mean. But I must talk to you about it, and you will not mind—will you, my own dear old Laura?'

'No; why should I mind what a stranger says?' cried Laura, a little wondering.

Kneeling at her cousin's feet and spreading the letter on her lap, while she took one of her hands in hers, Winnie read as follows :—

'MY DEAR WINIFRID,

'I should have written to you on your father's death had you announced it yourself, but it seemed to me rather negligent of you to employ your cousin to convey the sad intelligence. I was of course greatly shocked and surprised, for though he often talked of his health, we none of us believed there was much the matter with him. However, you are, I am sure, too well trained to repine at the Divine will ; and, knowing that your dear father has made a good exchange, you must not give way to grief, which will only unfit you for your work here below. Both Mr. Morgan and myself are deeply grieved to hear, through your good friend Admiral Desbarres, that there seems to be no provision for you. If all the money your father expended on your cousin had been invested, you might now have a nice little sum to fall back upon. I never could understand how your mother permitted him to adopt a niece—the child, too, of a marriage to which he *must* have been opposed for every reason. However, that cannot be helped now, and I am sure you must acknowledge that you really have no claim on Mr. Morgan. As to myself, I had no fortune of my own, and of course I cannot take my husband's money to give to my relatives ; but while you are looking about you, I shall be very happy to have you with us for a few months. I write also to Admiral Desbarres enclosing this, and you will of course be guided by his advice. If you accept my invitation, let me know at once when we shall see you. I shall be happy to pay your fare, second class, and will send some one to meet you at the station. Meantime, with all good wishes and kind regards, in which Mr. Morgan joins, I am, your affectionate aunt,

E. MORGAN.'

Winnie ceased, and a pause ensued.

'Isn't it hateful ?' said she at last, looking a little anxiously into Laura's face ; 'but you don't mind ?'

'No,' returned Laura slowly. 'I don't mind, but it is a sort of revelation to me of my uncle's great goodness.'

culties. I am conservative and aristocratic in my principles, and I have always managed to keep out of debt.'

'I am sure some of the most charming aristocratic English people we met in Germany were so deeply in debt that they could not return to England,' said Winnie, laughing.

'Theirs was not true aristocracy,' returned Mrs. Crewe loftily. 'But with these views you can imagine how bitterly I felt putting a son of mine into the Merchant Service; but he seems very happy, and is getting on very well. He was promoted to be chief officer the voyage before this one, and I hope he will soon be captain. I rather expect him home in a month or six weeks. Ah! he will be pleased to find I have two charming girls to keep me company, for he was not at all satisfied when he left because I had taken a young man to board—a very respectable young man, who is one of Thurston and Trent's clerks—the Admiral's solicitors, you know; but he grew unsteady and irregular in his payments; then he wanted to bring in friends to supper! At last he borrowed small sums, and gave notice; but I have never seen him or any money since.'

'That is too bad,' remarked Laura sympathetically.

'Oh, I fancy he will pay me yet; I do not think he was bad-hearted—only thoughtless and—not a gentleman,' and for a whole afternoon Mrs. Crewe talked and questioned and exclaimed in the largest capitals.

'I wish, dear,' said Mrs. Crewe to Laura a few hours later, 'that you would just look at the table, and tell me if it is all right. I never attempted to entertain the Admiral before, and I do not know his tastes.'

'Nor do I,' returned Laura. 'I think his tastes are very simple, and everything is very nice, Mrs. Crewe. Admiral Desbarres is a man for whom one would never put on fine things, or make a display; but though I love and revere him, I am not quite at ease in his presence.'

'I know,' said Mrs. Crewe, nodding her head sagaciously; 'I feel the same as if I were in church, and had my best bonnet on, and must not think profane thoughts.'

'Still, Laura, though he is so superior,' put in Winnie, 'I fancy he likes people to look nice; and I wish you

'No one, indeed!' echoed Laura. 'But come, we must not keep Mrs. Crewe waiting.'

It was a genuine delight to that lady to place the best of everything within her means before her young guests, to load their plates, to press them to eat, and it was a real disappointment when they failed to consume what she provided.

Her enthusiastic appreciation of Winnie's good looks and pleasant manners knew no bounds. Laura she summed up as a nice good girl, 'a little cold and reserved perhaps, but will no doubt improve on acquaintance.'

'Your brother has not come in yet,' said Mrs. Crewe, as the two girls entered the little dining-room. 'It is really too bad. He will not get his dinner comfortably. A fore-quarter of lamb cannot be played tricks with; I will cut off his dinner. Collins will keep it hot for him; and, Collins, bring me my precious Toppy's plate. Laura, my love, let me send you this nice little rib. We will keep the shoulder for this evening. Dear, dear! that girl has never left a dish for it! Would you mind passing me that hand-bell; the regular bell is always breaking.'

'Let me go and tell her what you want,' said Laura good-naturedly, and rising from her seat; 'it will save her a journey upstairs.'

'No, no! pray do not trouble yourself, my dear; you really will spoil her, and I am sure I do not know what you will think of my *ménage*!'

'You need not trouble about that,' said Winnie, smiling, as Laura left the room. 'The kitchen and the dining-room doors were exactly opposite each other in Dresden, and we often helped to bring in the dinner.'

'Dear me! is it possible? How many servants did you keep, my love? Thank you, Laura; do sit down and eat something. Is that girl coming? Oh, here, Collins! Come, come, hold the dish nearer! There, put that in the larder *directly*, Collins! on the left-hand shelf, mind. Take some mint sauce, Winnie—I really *cannot* call you Miss Fielden.'

'Pray do not,' returned the young lady.

'But you did not tell me,' persisted Mrs. Crewe, when the next break in her hospitable cares permitted—'you did not tell me how many servants you kept.'

'Only one.'

'And you were four in family, and saw company, you say? It must have been a tight fit! But then, no doubt, German servants are very different from the conceited young ladies we have to contend with. There!' interrupting herself, as the sound of the door-bell reached them—'there is Herbert! Collins, bring a hot plate for Master Herbert; I will cut his dinner for him, then you can take away the lamb, and bring the tart.—Well, Mr. Herbert, where have you been?'

'I am very sorry to be so late, Mrs. Crewe, but I strolled away as far as St. James's, and saw the guard mounted; then I fell in with a German nurse, as I came back through Kensington Gardens, looking for one of the children who had strayed away. She could not speak a word of English; so I stopped and helped her.'

'Now, my dears, what are you going to do this afternoon? Would you like to go out?' asked Mrs. Crewe.

'I do not want to go out,' said Winnie sadly.

'Nor I,' added Laura.

'Then,' said Mrs. Crewe cheerfully, 'let us have a nice quiet afternoon, working and talking. I suppose you young ladies have some elegant fancy-work on hand; I am reduced to darn my stockings—a work I detest.'

'If I might bring down my paint-box and things,' said Laura, with hesitation, 'I could finish a note-book I have been doing for my guardian.'

'Certainly!' cried Mrs. Crewe with great readiness. 'I adore everything artistic.'

'And if you like, I will help you to darn your stockings,' said Winnie, leaning a little towards her hostess in the half-caressing manner peculiar to her; 'for I have no work of my own.'

'You are really a darling!' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe. 'We will have dinner cleared away as soon as Herbert has finished, and settle ourselves here, because (I did not mean to tell you, but I cannot keep it) I expect the tuner this afternoon; the instrument is a good one, but terribly neglected.'

'Oh that will be delightful!' cried Winnie. 'I long to play, and yet I dread to hear the sound of the airs—the music my father used to love!'

'I do not think I have shown you my son's photograph,' said Mrs. Crewe, after Laura had settled her painting materials and recommenced the half-finished group of wild-flowers on pale-gray Russia leather which she designed for her guardian, and Winnie, with a basketful of stockings, had established herself on the sofa. 'I will bring it;' and she left the room for a minute, returning with a morocco case in her hand, which she opened and handed to Winnie.

'Is he not a handsome fellow? He has such fine eyes: and see, what a broad intellectual brow! He is, though *I* say it, wonderfully clever, and so naturally refined; while his devotion to *me* is something too sweet! Is it not a charming face?'

'Very nice indeed,' said Winnie kindly, looking at it for a moment and passing it on to Laura.

Laura took the portrait and gazed at it with some interest. It represented a man of perhaps thirty, with certainly a broad forehead, which seemed low from the mass of black hair that fell over it; dark, well-assured, somewhat wistful eyes; and the rest of the features large and strong rather than refined; the embrowned countenance grave, almost stern. 'It is a resolute face, yet I should not be afraid of it,' said Laura thoughtfully, as she continued to look at the picture.

'Afraid!' echoed Mrs. Crewe. 'I should think not! He is the gentlest, quietest creature in a house.'

'Let me see,' asked Herbert. 'I would not like to vex him,' was the boy's comment. 'He looks like a fellow that could give you a thrashing if you deserved it. Is he in the Navy, Mrs. Crewe?'

'No, I am sorry to say he is not,' sighed Mrs. Crewe. 'It has always been a mortification to me that he could not follow his father's profession. Captain Crewe was in the Royal Navy, you know. But he died when my dear boy was just old enough to want a great deal more in the way of education than *I* could give him; and then a kind friend got him a berth on board one of Duncan and Gibbs' ships—and so he went into the Mercantile Marine; but it was a bitter trial: though what the Mercantile Marine is to the country no words of mine can express.—Don't take so much trouble over that stocking, dear; it really is not

worth it. The way they destroy things in the wash is abominable. But, as I was saying, I could not give Denzil—his name is Arthur Charles Francis Denzil, after my mother's grandfather, Lord Denzil of Coomb; and that is a thing that annoys me—the other officers in Duncan and Gibbs' service are *not* well bred. When they come up here to see my son, it is Denny here and Denny there, as if he were any low Irishman.'

Herbert took *Ivanhoe* from its place, and went away to read in the garden. There was a pause, during which Collins put in her head.

'Please, 'm,' she said, 'there's a gentleman called as wants to repair the piano.'

'A gentleman!' repeated Mrs. Crewe, and sailed out of the room.

'Oh, Laura, is she not fun?' whispered Winnie. 'We are *in* for a chapter of Denny. He is very good, I dare-say, but he looks like a smuggler—a sort of amiable Dirk Hatteraick.'

'I like his face,' said Laura thoughtfully, 'and he must be a good son to be so loved.'

Re-enter Mrs. Crewe. Discordant sounds from the next room.

'Now, my dears, we shall have a little music of an evening,' said Mrs. Crewe, resuming her seat. 'I delight in music. I am longing to hear *you* play, Winnie! What were we talking of?—oh, Denzil. Yes, as I was saying, it was not in my power to give him those advantages which he deserved; but he is quite a bookworm. Those are all his books there. He was always fond of improving himself. Those were trying times, my loves! such as I trust you will never know; but I hope I never forgot, all through the worst of them, that I was the daughter and the wife of British officers, and tried to keep up the appearance of a gentlewoman.'

'I am sure you did,' said Laura kindly; 'and I know how hard it is to keep up appearances. I am afraid it is rather waste of energy to do so.'

'No, that it is not,' returned Mrs. Crewe warmly. 'It just gives strength and courage to feel that you are holding your place where God put you, in spite of diffi-

culties. I am conservative and aristocratic in my principles, and I have always managed to keep out of debt.'

'I am sure some of the most charming aristocratic English people we met in Germany were so deeply in debt that they could not return to England,' said Winnie, laughing.

'Theirs was not true aristocracy,' returned Mrs. Crewe loftily. 'But with these views you can imagine how bitterly I felt putting a son of mine into the Merchant Service; but he seems very happy, and is getting on very well. He was promoted to be chief officer the voyage before this one, and I hope he will soon be captain. I rather expect him home in a month or six weeks. Ah! he will be pleased to find I have two charming girls to keep me company, for he was not at all satisfied when he left because I had taken a young man to board—a very respectable young man, who is one of Thurston and Trent's clerks—the Admiral's solicitors, you know; but he grew unsteady and irregular in his payments; then he wanted to bring in friends to supper! At last he borrowed small sums, and gave notice; but I have never seen him or any money since.'

'That is too bad,' remarked Laura sympathetically.

'Oh, I fancy he will pay me yet; I do not think he was bad-hearted—only thoughtless and—not a gentleman,' and for a whole afternoon Mrs. Crewe talked and questioned and exclaimed in the largest capitals.

'I wish, dear,' said Mrs. Crewe to Laura a few hours later, 'that you would just look at the table, and tell me if it is all right. I never attempted to entertain the Admiral before, and I do not know his tastes.'

'Nor do I,' returned Laura. 'I think his tastes are very simple, and everything is very nice, Mrs. Crewe. Admiral Desbarres is a man for whom one would never put on fine things, or make a display; but though I love and revere him, I am not quite at ease in his presence.'

'I know,' said Mrs. Crewe, nodding her head sagaciously; 'I feel the same as if I were in church, and had my best bonnet on, and must not think profane thoughts.'

'Still, Laura, though he is so superior,' put in Winnie, 'I fancy he likes people to look nice; and I wish you

would wear one of my white frills—it would be such an improvement.'

'Very well, Winnie,' replied Laura carelessly. The result of which assent was that Winnie took charge of her cousin's toilette, much to the improvement of her appearance.

The Admiral was a little late, for which he made a careful and distinct apology. He had been issuing from his hotel, when a young man—'your relative, Laura, Mr. Reginald Piers—came in, and I could do no more than turn back with him, as his visit was an entirely gratuitous act of civility. I trust, therefore, Mrs. Crewe, you will see that my want of punctuality was unavoidable. I told Mr. Piers after a few minutes that I was due here at seven-thirty, and he at once released me.'

'Pray do not mention it, Admiral; tea is not like dinner, and we are all well pleased to wait for *you*.'

After the third cup had been universally declined, though the hostess assured them that there was still excellent tea in the teapot, Admiral Desbarres said very deliberately, 'Will you permit me to go into the next room with Laura and Winnie? I have some matters to speak about, the result of which I shall communicate to you afterwards.'

'Certainly, my dear sir! certainly!' replied Mrs. Crewe blandly; 'I shall be waiting here whenever you want me.'

So Laura rose, and led the way into the drawing-room, which was Mrs. Crewe's most sacred shrine, and, though not too abundantly furnished, was cheerful and pretty, and sweet with mignonette and wallflowers.

The Admiral sat down on the sofa, Laura on a low chair opposite, and Winnie, after a moment's hesitation, said with a smile and a blush, 'May I sit by you?' The Admiral immediately held out his hand, and Winnie nestled to his side with her naturally caressing manner. 'We have several matters to discuss,' said the Admiral, after a pause; 'your affairs, my dear Winifrid, are the most pressing. You have had a letter from your aunt? and as I have for the present taken the place of your guardian and nearest friend, I feel justified in asking to see it.'

'Yes, of course,' cried Winnie, rising to go and find it.

'I intended to show it to you ; I am sure you will think it anything but kind.'

'She is a loving gentle child,' said the Admiral, looking after her kindly, 'but has all the hasty prejudice natural to youth. You, Laura, seem gifted with better and calmer judgment ; you must assist me in guiding this impatient spirit.'

'Winnie is very bright,' said Laura, 'and has a good deal of natural insight ; the letter is rather harsh.'

'I must read it myself and judge,' he replied.

The Admiral kept silence, even after he had finished and returned the epistle to its envelope. 'It is deficient in kindness of tone,' he said at length ; 'nevertheless it is kind in reality. Your mother's sister offers you the shelter of her home, and for every reason it would be well to accept it !'

Winnie's eyes filled up, and she shook her head.

'Reflect,' resumed the Admiral, 'she is your nearest of kin ; she is disposed to befriend you. If you reject her advance, you perhaps deprive yourself of a natural ally ; if you go to her, you are very likely to touch her heart and convert her into a valuable friend. I too have had a letter from Mrs. Morgan, somewhat in the same strain : she suggests what you have yourself thought of—that your education, your familiarity with foreign tongues, ought to be a means of support. She is probably right ; but, my child, you are so young, so inexperienced, that I rather shrink from the idea of your going among strangers.'

'I am sure I would prefer real strangers !' ejaculated Winnie.

'Besides,' continued the Admiral, not heeding the interruption, 'I have a strong prejudice—I should rather say conviction—against women going forth to battle with the world ; it is opposed to the Divine will, so far as we can trace it in natural laws. They have plenty of work—most useful work—placed before them ; but let it be in private, and under the shelter of sufficient protection.'

'Yet it is disgraceful to women, as well as to men, to live on the bounty of others,' said Laura.

'Not so much,' he returned. 'You have rights, which no man of proper feeling can deny.'

'At all events, you think I ought to go to Liverpool?' said Winnie ruefully. 'I hoped I might stay here, and perhaps Laura and I could get pupils; or she might sell her pictures or copies, and I might translate things: for Mrs. Crewe is so kind, we feel quite at home with her, and both Laura and I are—hesitation and blushes—are ashamed of costing you so much.'

A tender smile spread over the Admiral's thoughtful face. 'You need not think of that; you are two fledglings God has given me to shelter. Laura is really and legally my charge; while you, Winifrid, are just as welcome to my care and help; but I do not feel justified in withdrawing you from your relatives and natural protectors. Therefore, while we try to ascertain if anything can be secured for you from the wreck of your poor father's property, or otherwise arrange your future, you had better accept your aunt's invitation.'

'It will be terrible to part,' urged Laura.

'But we must,' added Winnie despairingly.

'It is not for ever,' said the Admiral with his kindest smile. 'If upon trial you find yourself unkindly treated, or fail in creating the tender motherly interest which blesses both giver and receiver, tell me frankly, and I will remove you; but you must give your aunt and her family a fair trial.'

'Oh thank you, dear, dear Admiral!' cried Winnie, fairly bursting into tears; 'that is a gleam of hope, and I will do whatever you wish.'

'All will be well if you are patient and faithful,' said the Admiral, taking her hand in both of his, which was his nearest approach to a caress. 'And now that we have discussed these letters, suppose you ask Mrs. Crewe to join us; I want to ask her if she can keep Herbert for the present. The holidays are at hand, and as his English is somewhat deficient, it would be well if some private lessons could be obtained for him.'

Mrs. Crewe was penetrated with regret at the idea of losing Miss Fielden. As to Herbert, the dear boy should be well looked after, and she thought her friend next door, Miss Brown, knew one of the masters of a large school close by, who often remained during the holidays, and

might be glad to give English lessons. Really, Miss Fielden's departure would be quite a blow. When must she leave them? She believed there were certain indispensable additions to dear Winifrid's toilette that must be provided.

'Indeed!' said the Admiral, with sudden attention. 'Be so good as to let me know what money is requisite, and I will endeavour to supply it.'

'You know, my dear guardian, that there will be a little money of mine coming soon,' murmured Laura. 'I shall stay here; I shall not want anything.'

'My dear, I require that you leave your affairs in my hands for the present,' said the Admiral with authority. 'I had almost forgotten to mention, Mrs. Crewe, that my young acquaintance, Mr. Reginald Piers, requests permission to call upon you and his relative Laura, whom he used to know before she went to Germany.'

'Oh! of course, Admiral; any friend of yours will be most welcome.'

'Reginald Piers!' repeated Laura, the colour slowly, faintly coming to her cheek.

'Reginald Piers!' cried Winnie. 'I remember he used to be such a tease. Oh, I shall be so glad to see him!'

A few words of leave-taking, and the Admiral was gone.

'There was never such a charming, well-bred, true Christian,' said Mrs. Crewe. 'And who is Mr. Reginald Piers, my dears? Is he a first cousin, Laura?'

'Oh no! third or fourth—I do not know exactly. He was at school with Dick—Winnie's eldest brother—and used often to spend the holidays with us.'

'He is very nice—or he used to be very nice,' added Winnie. 'He is older than Dick, and very clever, I believe. The last time he was at Cheddington he had just gone into some business or office in London. I wonder how the Admiral met him? But if you do not mind, Mrs. Crewe, I will go to bed; I feel quite heart-broken at the idea of going to this strange aunt.'

Arrived in their own quarters, poor Winnie quite broke down; and when at last Laura persuaded her to go to bed, sobbed herself to sleep like a weary disappointed child.

Then Laura drew forth her writing-case, and sat down to make a few entries in her journal, and then from out of her few treasures she took a case of photographs, and gazed at the well-known, well-loved faces of the aunt and uncle who had been as parents to her. Finally, she dwelt long upon the portrait of a young man—a face that satisfied her ideal of manliness, intelligence, refinement; and while she gazed, she lived over again many a ramble through wood and field, many a game of noisy play, many an eager argument, many a quieter talk when the boy's dawning ambition suggested air castles, to which she listened with delighted interest; and nearer memories still recalled the last weeks they had spent together, which from some hidden cause had been imbued with such strange sweetness—sweetness her heart ached to remember; and then all was dark and dreary. Reginald Piers passed out of her life into the world of reality beyond her ken; change and sorrow and separation came, and she saw him no more. But he was coming!—coming of his own free will and unconstrained kindness! What joy to listen to that pleasant voice, to see those bright laughing eyes once more; if only—only she were not so plain and colourless, so little gifted with grace or loveliness! Oh for even a shadow of Winnie's beauty!—that beauty which her artistic soul loved and admired with a generous appreciative love.

'How weak and foolish and contemptible I am,' she murmured at last, hastily closing up the case, 'to waste my heart in such fruitless longings! Let me grasp what gifts I have, and make the most of them. Friendship is worth something.'

CHAPTER VI.

LUNCHEON was over in the temporary dwelling of Sir Gilbert Jervois, one warm rainy afternoon at the end of May, more than a month after the death of Mr. Fielden and the accession of Reginald Piers to the family estate.

'Is Sir Gilbert at home?' asked that gentleman, as the

only man-servant the Baronet deemed necessary to his town establishment opened the door.

'No, sir; Sir Gilbert started this morning for Paris, but my lady is in the drawing-room.'

She was not there, however, when Reginald was shown in, nor did she join him for some minutes. These he employed in turning over some books which lay upon the table, till his attention was arrested by a volume of Byron, in faded but once gorgeous binding; when the sombre expression of his countenance gave place to a half-mocking, half-kindly smile, as he opened it and read on the fly-leaf, 'To H. G. F., from her attached A. P.'

That book! he had known it all his life; it had been one of the ornaments on his mother's table in the dimly-remembered time when he could just recall his father, a querulous troublesome invalid, but to chance visitors a charming high-bred man of the world, and a delightful companion.

Algernon Piers had been for a good many years *attaché* to a small legation at a small German Court, and even in this simple society of homely highnesses he contrived to amass a tolerable amount of debt. These encumbrances had reached inconvenient dimensions when a family of wandering English visited the picturesque little town of Stolzstadt. The agreeable *attaché* soon became indispensable to the visitors, and ended by fascinating the wealthy orphan niece of the leader of the expedition, and the course of true love in this instance ran exceedingly smooth.

But the smoothness of Mr. and Mrs. Algernon Piers's after-life was of a slippery kind. Indolent, self-indulgent, unsuspecting, ignorant of the value of money, whenever any unpleasant pleasure pinched them, money was raised, or stock sold, till, when her husband was overtaken by his last illness, Mrs. Piers awoke to find herself almost reduced to poverty.

How well Reginald could remember the narrow limits of his early home-life; the long consideration of—'to be, or not to be,' as regarded new clothes; the enormous importance attached to his sister's dress; the steadiness with which his mother closed up her ranks and presented

'Yes; but, Helen, I do not want to go to Pierslynn so soon; I have business that may detain me; still, if you and my mother and Sybil like to go, the place is at your service. Where are you going?'

For Lady Jervois was in her outdoor attire.

'I am going to the Scholastic Agency Office in Piccadilly to see about a German governess for Sybil; she is really too backward for a girl nearly ten years old. Indeed, I fear I have neglected her—I have been so absorbed in my own troubles; but *you*, dear Reggie, have set me free, and I can never thank you enough.'

Reginald did not seem to hear her. 'Where is my mother?' he asked abruptly, after a short pause.

'She went up to put on her bonnet—she is coming with me.'

'I want to speak to her,' said Reginald.

'I never saw such a change as in her,' said Lady Jervois. 'She is ten years younger since you succeeded to Pierslynn; indeed, I am almost as much revived. I really think my mother and myself are more elated than you are.'

'Ah! you do not know what this succession is to me. I—'

The entrance of Mrs. Piers prevented his finishing his sentence.

'Reginald,' said his mother, kissing him warmly, 'I did not know you were here. I wish you could come with me to see the landlord of my house, and get him to finish the alterations we want. I should like to get settled by the middle of August.'

'Very well,' returned Reginald. 'And now, mother, I want Nellie and you to do something for me.'

'What is it, Reggie?' said both ladies together.

'You remember I told you that poor Fielden was dead? Well, Admiral Desbarres has brought over the daughter and youngest boy as well as his ward, Laura Piers, who is a distant cousin of ours, and placed them with some lady, the widow of an old brother-officer, I think. Now, I want you both to call on these girls—you especially, mother. It would be only right, considering all the hospitality I received from the Fieldens, and—you'll come with me, will you not?' breaking off abruptly.

'Yes; but, Helen, I do not want to go to Pierslynn so soon; I have business that may detain me; still, if you and my mother and Sybil like to go, the place is at your service. Where are you going?'

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'What sort of girls are these wards of Admiral Desbarres?' asked Mrs Piers in an unfriendly tone.

'Laura only is his ward,' returned Reginald. 'Oh! they are nice and ladylike—at least, Laura was—the other was quite a schoolgirl when I saw her last. I do not know how she has turned out; but Laura was a very pleasant girl, with lots to say.'

'Is she pretty?' said Mrs. Piers in a frigid tone.

'No! not a bit,' replied Reginald, laughing. 'Why, are you already scenting matrimonial rocks ahead, mother?'

'Indeed, Reginald, you may laugh,' she returned, herself relaxing into a smile; 'but it is well for a young man in your position to be cautious. Without any thought on your part, your attentions may give rise to hopes which it would be painful to crush; these boy-and-girl friendships are apt to become entanglements it would be well to avoid.'

'A pleasant look-out for me,' said Reginald, still laughing, 'if I am to weigh every word I speak to a pretty girl! Why, downright matrimony would be freedom compared to such a state of things.'

'Ah, my dear boy, would to Heaven I could find a suitable wife for you!' said Mrs. Piers piously. 'For you are not only entitled to, but deserve, all that is best.'

'Youth, beauty, rank, accomplishments, and riches. Eh, mother?'

'However, as Miss Piers has none of these qualifications, there can be small danger. Let us go and leave our cards upon her,' said Lady Jervois. 'How is she related to us, Reginald?'

'I scarcely know. Her father was a Captain Edward Piers, and I think he knew *my* father. Do you remember anything of him?' to Mrs. Piers.

'Oh! she is Edward Piers's daughter? Yes, I remember his staying with us at a pretty little place we had near Goodwood. He came for the races. He was certainly a cousin, and he and your father used to be together a good deal as boys, I believe; but there was a something about his family not quite *comme il faut*. I don't know what. Oh, it was ages ago. He was very nice. I remember his strolling in the garden with me by moonlight, and telling

me how desperately in love he was with the sister of a clergyman, somewhere in Devonshire, I think; but her people opposed the marriage—then I lost sight of him.'

'I am not at all up in genealogy,' remarked Reginald; 'all I know is that the Fieldens were very kind to me, and we ought to show these girls some attention.'

'Very well, Reginald. Where do they live? If not very far, you might come with us to call there first.'

'There is the address,' taking Admiral Desbarres' card, on the back of which he had written it from his note-book —'13 Leamington Road, Westbourne Park.'

'That is rather out of the way—beyond the parks,' said Lady Jervois.

'I know it was too expensive a neighbourhood for me to lodge in six weeks ago,' returned Reginald, laughing, 'and I used to envy a fellow-clerk of mine having such nice quarters. I believe he lived in this very house.'

'Let us go, then,' said Mrs. Piers; adding in a rather dissatisfied tone, 'They will certainly be at home such a day as this.'

Reginald threw a curious glance, half laughing yet resolute, at his mother; and then, with extreme politeness, offered his arm to lead her to the carriage.

But in spite of rain and mud, Collins, somewhat excited by the unusual appearance of 'carriage company' in Leamington Road, reported 'Missus and the young ladies' as gone out, whereupon a small pack of cards were deposited in her grimy hands.

Mrs. Crewe's regret at missing these distinguished visitors was both loud and deep. 'I am sure it was very kind and friendly to call, and such a bad day! They evidently intended to find us at home. I see Mr. Piers has left three cards! I suppose one is for me. I am rather surprised the ladies did not do the same.'

'Oh! I daresay one card was meant for Laura and me together, you know, as we are like sisters,' cried Winnie, with ready tact.

'Reginald says he will come again; how glad I shall be to see him!' cried Laura, studying his card. 'I hope you w^tl not be gone when he comes, Winnie. How surprised he will be to see you!'

To this Winnie made no answer : she could not command her voice to speak of her fast-approaching departure ; for neither the pleasant operation of renewing her rather exhausted wardrobe, nor a fairly polite letter from her unknown aunt, had reconciled her to the prospect of this plunge into life on her own account.

The dreaded day of parting drew near with appalling rapidity. Laura was more affected by Winnie's sudden determination to endure and to submit than she would have been by the loudest lamentations. She would have given anything to go in her place, for though not three years Winnie's senior, she had a wonderfully maternal feeling for her cousin, a longing to spare her in all possible ways ; partly, perhaps, from the tender, grateful regard she had had for the aunt to whom this only daughter had been so inexpressibly dear , partly from the pleasure she always took in Winnie's beauty and grace. Laura exhausted all the topics of consolation in her power ; but chiefly she dwelt on the Admiral's permission to return should Winifrid find life in Liverpool unendurable.

'And you will write often, dear, dear Laura ? Answer all my letters, and tell me all about Reginald Piers.'

'Yes, dear, I will.'

Next morning, with many tearful embraces and promises to write, with a motherly blessing, a huge packet of sandwiches, and a flask of sherry-and-water from Mrs. Crewe, an illustrated paper and the *Leisure Hour* from the Admiral, Winnie, trying to smile through her tears, was set forward on her first step alone in the journey of life.

CHAPTER VII.

IN the days which followed Winnie's departure Laura was like a creature that had lost her other self. To wake in the morning, and see Winnie's little white bed smooth and empty ; to sit down to work or paint, and find herself on the point of uttering some thought, and suddenly remember that there was no other self to receive the utterance ; to go to rest at night, unaccompanied, alone—how painful it all

was ! What a sense of being lost weighed down every minute of those first days ! Above all there was the perpetual working of her imagination : ceaselessly did it present pictures of what Winnie was doing or suffering ; of how Winnie would conduct herself, and manage her clothes ; and how miserable she would be by herself, even if her stranger relatives were nice and kind. Mrs. Crewe was most sympathetic : ‘ I am sure I don’t wonder at your feeling your cousin’s loss ! ’ she would say ; ‘ a sweeter girl I never saw, and so pretty ! You’ll see she will pick up a rich husband in Liverpool, so it may be all for the best.’

‘ I do not know that,’ said Laura, smiling ; ‘ I should lose her then altogether ! ’

‘ Oh, in a good cause you would not mind ! Now, don’t stay moping in your own room. If you are not going to paint, and have nothing particular to do, would you mind altering the neck of my black grenadine for me ? it is too low at the left side. I cannot manage these sort of things, and you are so handy ; meanwhile, I will just look at the paper and read anything interesting.’

‘ Very well, Mrs. Crewe,’ said Laura resignedly ; and Mrs. Crewe had just left the room to seek the garment in question when the post brought the eagerly-anticipated letter from Winnie. Four days had passed since they parted, and, as agreed upon, after despatching a post-card to announce her safe arrival, Winnie waited to gain some idea of her surroundings before writing.

‘ MY OWN DEAR LAURA,

‘ I feel as if I had such a volume to tell you, I do not know where to begin. First of all, I cried half the way here ; I felt nearly as miserable as that terrible evening when the dear father was taken from us ! When we arrived at Liverpool I felt half frightened to be quite alone among such a crowd of strangers ; but a kind old gentleman stayed with me, and presently a rather rough-looking man, like a bad style of groom, came along the platform, saying, “ Any lady here for Mr. Morgan’s, Prince’s Park ? ” so I stepped forward, and he asked my name ; then he said it was all right ; he had been sent to fetch me, and had a cab waiting. We had quite a long drive—oh, such a

wretched drive! This is a fine large house, splendidly furnished, quite stiff with grandeur; but when I got in there was only a parlour-maid to receive me. My aunt was out in the carriage with my eldest cousin, and the little ones were away with their maid. Then I went to my room—a pretty little room, very tiny—and made myself presentable; by that time the servant knocked at the door and said Mrs. Morgan was waiting for me in the drawing-room.

'I felt nervous, you may be sure; however, I went down. My aunt is an immensely stout woman, and was gorgeously arrayed, but is rather good-looking, and greeted me pleasantly. "I thought you wouldn't be here before six," she said. "Here, Amelia, here is your cousin Winifrid!" and then my cousin Amelia came forward. Oh, such a slim, elegant, laced-up young lady! she gave me a hand which was merely what Herbert would call a "bunch of fives"—such cold loose fingers!

'At dinner I was introduced to Mr. Morgan. He is tall and thin and yellow, and very well dressed, but he does not seem quite like a gentleman; he hardly took any notice of me, and seemed rather cross. He found fault with everything at table, though all was excellent; when he had finished eating he suddenly asked what this Admiral friend of mine intended to do with me: "Is he going to adopt you or support you?" I said I should think not; that I hoped to support myself. Then he gave a sort of a sneering laugh, and said that was easier said than done; so my aunt cried out, "Nonsense, Tom! the girl shows a right spirit; don't you discourage her."

'After dinner we went into the drawing-room. Mr. Morgan settled himself to sleep in the biggest armchair, and Mrs. Morgan sat down and fanned herself in another, while Amelia asked me if I could play. Presently her mother asked her to open the piano; she did so, and played a valse of Chopin's—one poor dear Fräulein Becker used to play so deliciously. It did not sound a bit like the same thing—she seemed to stutter over the music.

'Soon after this the children came in. They had been spending the evening somewhere; they were wonderfully dressed, and their hair was plaited and frizzed and tied up

with ribbons ; they took very little notice of me, but seemed great pets with their father. There are two little girls, ten and twelve, and a boy of eight—the eldest boy, about fourteen, is away at Rugby. These children are odious ; they seem to be guessing the money value of every new thing they see ; I am really quite sorry for them, they are so unnatural !

‘ Yesterday my aunt and Amelia went to an “afternoon” at some lady’s house, so I was put in charge of the second girl Sarah, and the nursemaid or bonne, to walk about the leading streets. It is a fine city, full of life ; but I do not think I shall like it. Now, do not imagine I am going to be fanciful and easily offended. I shall be patient and reasonable. I really do not dislike my aunt ; she seems kind and good-humoured ; but I never felt so small in my life before—so poor and insignificant. Still, things may get better ; but oh, Laura—dear, dear Laura, if I could only throw my arms round you and hear your voice and have a good cry, I should feel quite strong ! Write to me soon—very, very soon—ask Herbert to write ! I never thought I loved him so much ; I hope he is not troublesome ! My kind love and thanks to dear Mrs. Crewe. Oh that I were sitting down to tea with you to-night ; but I am determined to be brave and cheerful. I write to the Admiral by this day’s post. Now I must go down to dinner. I have put on my new dress with the train, and the jet pins in my hair, and I think I look rather nice ! God bless you, dearest Laura ; I pray for you every night. Ever your loving cousin and sister,

‘ WINIFRID FIELDEN.’

While Laura turned over the pages of the letter to re-read it, Mrs. Crewe came back with Toppy on her shoulder.

‘ The utter carelessness of Collins,’ she said, ‘ is most disgraceful. Not one morsel of breakfast has this precious puss had to-day ! and when I went to look for her, she was crouched in the garden with all her dear little toes tucked under her, absolutely weak for want of food ! so I stopped to give her some cold mutton.—You have had a letter, dear ?’ interrupting herself. ‘ From our sweet Winnie ? Tell me all about it.’

Laura read her some extracts, and told her the rest, being resolved against too unlimited a degree of confidence. Mrs. Crewe was by no means satisfied.

'Does she not mention her uncle, dear? I imagine she will be a favourite with him! Men, young or old, are always mollified by good looks, and of course it is *most* important to stand well with him! Is there an elder son, my dear? Does she say if they keep a butler? Oh! you need not be afraid to trust me; I never gossip. Dear creature! I wish she were back here, with all my heart! Now, don't make yourself unhappy. So far as *you have allowed me to understand*, I think everything is very satisfactory.'

There was a certain amount of rebuke in Mrs. Crewe's emphasis, but before Laura could reply a sudden sharp ring diverted her interlocutor's attention.

'That is the front-door bell, and it is rather early for visitors.'

A moment's pause, when the much-enduring Collins put in her head cautiously sideways, so as to keep one eye on the umbrella stand.

'There's a gentleman wants to see you, mum,' holding forth a card at the same time.

'Is it the beer-man?' asked Mrs. Crewe, without moving.

Laura rose and took the card, turning strangely hot and cold as she read aloud, 'Mr. Reginald Piers.'

'Goodness gracious!' cried Mrs. Crewe, 'put him in the drawing-room, my girl, and pull up the venetians—the sun is nearly off now. Would you mind going in, dear Laura, while I put on another cap?'

'No, Mrs. Crewe,' said Laura, trembling a little, and glancing at a small mirror that hung between the windows as Mrs. Crewe hurried out of the room. It gave back the reflection of a pale face and eyes never very bright, but now dimmed and slightly red; lips that closed perhaps too firmly, yet could smile pleasantly; and a figure, as has been said before, straight enough, but somewhat square. Her hair was neatly braided, and her dress was carefully, put on, but the absence of the slightest coquetry of toilette the sombre unrelieved black of her garments, bespoke an almost pathetic renunciation of woman's first, most natural

ambition—the power to charm ; nevertheless, her movements as she walked towards the drawing-room were easy and not undignified, and the somewhat unsteady hand she laid upon the door was small and well-shaped.

Surely it was a glorified likeness of her cousin Reggie, rather than the well-remembered original, which met her eyes as she entered—taller than she expected, straight, ‘svelte,’ attired in faultless garments, a gardenia and morsel of heliotrope in his button-hole, a riding-whip and his hat in one hand, the other extended to take hers.

‘Laura, I am delighted to see you again ! I was determined to find you this time, so I came at an outrageous hour ; but you and I need not stand on ceremony ?’

‘Oh Reginald, I am so glad to see you ; and yet, how you bring everything back to me !’

Her voice broke, and she stood still and silent, struggling hard for self-control. Reginald laid down both hat and whip, and put his other hand over the one he held.

‘Come,’ he said, ‘you must not let me think the sight of me is painful. My dear girl ! I am afraid you have had hard times since we met.’

He drew her to the sofa, placing himself beside her, and relinquishing her hand.

‘Ah !’ exclaimed Laura, smiling frankly as she looked at him, ‘the sight of you is very pleasant to me, dear Reggie ; it is so long since I have seen anything or any one familiar, and you are very good to come and see me.’

‘Good !’ repeated Reginald, with a slight smile ; ‘good to myself ! You cannot know how vividly I remember our old friendship,’ he continued, after a scarcely perceptible pause. ‘I only feared to find you more cut up and altered, instead of looking——’ What, he did not say, but he gazed into Laura’s eyes with an expression that puzzled but did not embarrass her.

‘The Admiral has told me something of how matters are, but no particulars,’ he resumed, after a pause ; ‘and you must grant me a kinsman’s right to inquire into your affairs. How long are you going to stay here ? What are you going to do ? What is to become of the Fielden children ?’

‘As to me, I hope to stay on here. Mrs. Crewe is very

kind, and I hope to get some pupils for German and drawing, and perhaps to sell some of my paintings. Do not laugh, Reginald; I have improved, and learned a great deal since we met, and I quite long to be self-supporting.'

'Laugh?' he replied kindly. 'I shall do no such thing. Don't you remember a sketch of the east end of Cheddington Church and the big oak tree you did for me when I was last at the Rectory? I have it still, Laura, among my treasures.'

'Have you really?' a faint colour stealing into her cheeks, and something of brilliancy lighting her eyes at the low tone in which he uttered these last words.

'I am glad you kept it; you see I am so alone that any bit of kindness is precious,' she added candidly.

'Tell me about poor Mr. Fielden's death,' he asked; and Laura, with unconscious force and pathos, described the last scene in Dresden—big tears slowly coursing down her cheek unheeded as she spoke. 'Awfully trying for you,' said Reginald, taking her hand tenderly. 'How the deuce our friend the Rector could have let himself drift into such a mess I cannot conceive! and Herbert and little Winnie, what are they doing?'

'Oh, Winnie is taller than I am, and has grown so pretty—more than pretty—poor dear Winnie! Her aunt in Liverpool invited her to stay there, and the Admiral thought she ought to go; but I am afraid she is as wretched there as I am without her; yet what can I do?'

'We must try to put matters in better train; we will consult together. Times have changed with me—'

Here the door opened suddenly, and Mrs. Crewe entered majestically. A quick glance and instantly suppressed smile as she came in showed Laura she had noticed that their distinguished-looking visitor was holding her hand affectionately.

'I am very happy to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance,' said Mrs. Crewe graciously; 'any friend of the Admiral and of my dear Laura is welcome to me.'

Reginald bowed politely.

'I am very glad to find Laura so happily placed,' he said, obeying the graceful gesture with which Mrs. Crewe waved him to a seat.

'You are very good, Mr. Piers, and I assure you I am most happy to have such a charming companion. I was very sorry to have missed Mrs. Piers and Lady Jervois when they called the other day.'

'Oh yes, they were very sorry too,' returned Reginald, catching a glimpse of Mrs. Crewe's idea, and feeling the necessity of adopting it. 'I hope you will soon be able to return the visit. My mother is quite anxious to make your acquaintance, Laura; she has heard so much about you.'

'Has she?' said Laura, opening her eyes.

'And,' continued Reginald, 'if she can be of any use to the young Fieldens, she would be most happy. I assure you we neither of us forget poor Mrs. Fielden's kindness and hospitality to me.'

'Oh, Reginald, you are as kind as ever!'

Laura's lips quivered, and her eyes lit up with pleasure and gratitude as she spoke.

'It is not every day such noble sentiments are to be met with,' said Mrs. Crewe softly; and then, quickly descending to her usual level of curiosity, she added, 'I see you have ridden out here this morning, Mr. Piers. It is a delightful exercise, and most healthful.'

'Ridden out!' repeated Laura, in some surprise, for she had no idea that her old companion's fortunes had changed so much for the better. 'Have you a horse, Reginald?'

'I have,' he said, smiling. 'I was going to tell you, when Mrs. Crewe came in, that I have succeeded to the Pierslynn property. Hugh Piers—a cousin, you know—was killed out hunting about six weeks ago, and I am his next-of-kin.'

'I never heard of him before,' replied Laura; 'and are you rich now, Reginald?'

'Yes—that is, fairly well off; and, what is better still, I have a nice old place in the country, where I hope we shall enjoy some rambles together as in old times—eh, Laura?' leaning forward and glancing up at her with a look half tender, half playful.

'I can hardly believe it,' returned Laura, feeling strangely, delightfully disturbed, a glow as of softest springtide warmth diffusing itself through her veins, and sending

unwonted colour to her cheeks. ‘I thought we were all poor together! Do you know, I feel half sorry. Your riches seem to put you away at a distance. Do you still go to that office in the city—Thurston and Trent—was that the name?’

‘Oh! I have left the shop, of course, but I see Trent very often; his wife was a Piers, you know.’

‘Dear, dear! how curiously things come about!’ cried Mrs. Crewe; ‘I suppose you mean Messrs. Thurston and Trent of Sydenham Chambers.’

‘Yes,’ returned Reginald.

‘Then you probably knew a Mr. Holden, who was a clerk in their establishment? He was for some time an inmate of mine—for I do not mind confessing to a man of your exalted turn of mind that I am obliged to seek occupants for a portion of my house, which is really larger than I require. A sailor, my dear Mr. Piers, no matter how well he may serve his country, seldom leaves a wealthy widow. But Mr. Holden mistook the character of the house, and became very irregular in his hours, and when I remonstrated he showed temper and gave me warning: I by no means regretted him.’

‘So Holden was here, was he?’ ejaculated Reginald, with evident interest; ‘he certainly was no fit inmate for you. He is not a gentleman; of course I knew him, being in the same office, but that was all. Well, Laura, when will you and Mrs. Crewe come and call on my mother and sister? I should like to meet you there—will Tuesday next suit you?’

‘All days suit me,’ said Laura, ‘if it will suit Mrs. Crewe.’

‘May I suggest Wednesday?’ said that lady sweetly; ‘I have an engagement on Tuesday.’

‘Oh! certainly,’ he returned, rising. ‘I have paid you a visitation, but you must let me come again soon. I should like to see Herbert—he was quite a small boy when I was last at the Rectory; and then we are to make some plans for Winnie’s deliverance! I shall look in on Monday or Tuesday, if you will let me, Mrs. Crewe.’

‘You may come when you like and as often as you like,’ said she, smiling unbounded approbation upon him.

‘Many thanks; good morning,’ returned Reginald.

'Good-bye for the present, Laura; I trust there are pleasant days in store for you! The sight of you has recalled some of my happiest hours,' he added in a low tone, pressing her hand with kindly, cousinly warmth.

'And you! oh, how you recall mine! I feel as if all the past had not quite gone from me when I hear you speak, Reggie!' she returned: her voice, always musical and expressive, instinct with warm sympathy.

'*Au revoir*, then,' and with a parting bow he left them.

At the sound of the front door closing, Mrs. Crewe moved quickly to a vantage-post, where, from behind the muslin-curtain, she could see without be seen. 'What a nice young man! Such distinguished manners, and a beautiful figure; he is standing at the gate putting on his gloves, waiting for the horses. Here they are; such beautiful horses and a most stylish groom! Why, my dear Laura, what is the matter?—sitting there crying! when you ought to be so pleased to have a young man of fortune and distinction and high family so much attached to you! Now, do not contradict me, dear. I know the world; I have had great experience, and I say that elegant young fellow is sincerely attached to you.'

'Yes, as a friend, a sister, I think he always did like me,' cried Laura, with nervous fear at Mrs. Crewe's words; 'but, believe me, anything else is out of the question. Indeed, considering it is more than three years since we heard anything of him—I am quite astonished that he has taken the trouble to come here and see me. He was always nice and good-natured, but I scarcely expected *this*.'

'My dear, he was probably not in a position to marry, and so was prudent. Now it is quite different—'

'Dear Mrs. Crewe'—earnestly, with clasped hands—'pray do not destroy the great pleasure I have in seeing Reggie by suggesting such ideas!'

'Well, well! if you take it in that light, I will not say another word; only, dear, I have my own opinion, and one day you will confess I am right.'

Laura smiled good-humouredly. 'You do not know how ridiculously impossible such a thing seems to me,' she said. 'Now, Mrs. Crewe, you have some needlework for me, have you not?'

'You can settle down to needlework?' asked Mrs. Crewe. 'Well, that is being quite philosophic; but as you are so good, I will just show you what I want. I think, my dear Laura, this dress and my black lace mantilla will do very well for our visit on Wednesday?'

'I am sure you will look very nice,' said Laura.

'But, Laura,' in a serious and impressive tone. 'I am really anxious about you! You ought to have a new dress—a black barège, if I might suggest—with a cross-over pelerine to go out in, and a new hat; appearance is of the last importance—especially sometimes. Now, I think it very necessary that you should make a good first impression on Mrs. Piers; and though I am the last person to counsel extravagance, I think, dear, you ought to treat yourself to a new dress and hat.'

'No, Mrs. Crewe, I cannot indulge myself in anything of the kind this quarter; I have all I absolutely require, and it would be a little extravagant to buy fine things for the sake of one visit, for I have an idea that we shall not see much more of Mrs. Piers. I know at the Rectory we all imagined her to be a proud cold woman, from little things.'

'Well, Laura, I wish you would be guided by me. I believe it is a duty you owe to yourself to make this little outlay. Believe me, you could improve yourself immensely by careful dressing; you do not give sufficient thought to appearance.'

'I give as much thought and more than it deserves to my own appearance,' returned Laura, laughing. 'But *this* sacrifice to the beautiful I do not feel called upon to make.'

The rest of the day passed tranquilly. Some delicate attentions to Toppy at dinner completely reconciled Mrs. Crewe to her young friend, and Laura occupied the afternoon in writing a voluminous letter to Winnie, largely made up of details of Reginald's visit, and then in arranging the materials for a picture she was attempting, partly from memory, partly from an old sketch of a glade in the woods behind the Rectory, with a number of curious lichen-covered stones, the remains of some shrine or altar, the memory of which had passed away, and a sleepy little shadowy pool

bordered with moss and rushes. The visit of that morning had brought the scene back to her more vividly than ever, for it was a favourite spot with both herself and Reginald. The attempt to reproduce this well-remembered spot was, in any case, a delicious employment; but to-day her thoughts and fancies were like sweetest chimes 'ringing peals of merry music from the belfry of her heart.' Yet she had been quite sincere in assuring Mrs. Crewe that the idea of anything lover-like in Reginald Piers seemed impossible to her. He was too much an ideal hero for her to think it possible that she could ever be anything but his friend, his somewhat humble friend, in spite of a certain intellectual equality. But to find him so true, so kind, so considerate, was a heavenly surprise; for, perhaps unconsciously, under all her liking and admiration for her bright good-looking playfellow lay a scarce-defined feeling that exalted loyalty, or warm remembrance, was not to be expected from Reggie. She had never done him quite justice; and now, to be able to let the full flow of her liking and admiration rise unchecked was too delicious! With Reginald's sympathy she could remove mountains. He would help her with her dear good beneficent guardian, and aid her in her attempt to get Winnie back. For to be happy while Winnie was miserable was something impossible, sacrilegious; and so Laura traced the outlines of her picture, being at that blest stage of gratified affection when nerves, fancy, imagination, are at their fullest and firmest, when faith in another radiates faith in one's self, before the glow and warmth that vivifies has passed into the flame that consumes.

CHAPTER VIII.

ADMIRAL DESBARRES' stay in town had extended into the third week, and he was beginning to be weary. But he was not a man to leave his work undone, and he waited bravely on until he saw Herbert fairly at work with the tutor he had found for the holidays, and until the investment was arranged for which Messrs. Thurston and Trent had promised to look out. The office was as full and busy

as it had been the morning Reginald Piers had stood smiling in Mr. Trent's room to announce the mighty change in his fortunes ; but on this occasion it was Mr. West who held council with the second partner—Mr. West, the only one remaining of the two who had formerly occupied the inner office on the ground-floor. They had been in earnest talk, and Mr. Trent's countenance looked more than usually dark and keen, when, as before, their conversation was interrupted by a clerk who presented the Admiral's card.

'Ah, my dear sir,' said the solicitor, after they had exchanged greetings, and West had bowed himself out, 'I suppose you have come to reproach our tardiness for not getting that little affair of yours settled. But, do you know, it is not so easy to find an investment such as I should like to recommend to you.'

'I have not come to reproach you,' interrupted the Admiral. 'I am, on the contrary, well pleased that matters have not gone farther. I had long interviews yesterday and the day before with Mr. Atkins, nephew of my old friend Lord Trevallan ; he has thoroughly explained his scheme of the Szolnok and Ofen Canal. He is himself a very honourable man, and an engineer of some experience. It is not, you know, a project in embryo. The company is formed, and they expect to hear daily that the Hungarian Chamber has granted their charter. Shares are rising, and it is by special favour that he is disposed to give me a sufficient number for the amount of capital I have to invest. Lord Trevallan is in it, and Mr. Grey, of Grey, Hughes, and Company,' continued the Admiral, taking a paper from his breast-pocket. 'Also Mr. Simon Pounce, Q.C. These are good names, and I see no reason for losing such an excellent investment from mere distrust of a scheme which has received the sanction of shrewd and honourable men. I have therefore resolved to invest in this company, especially as it is highly probable no further call will be made than fifty pounds per share, which at present pay six per cent.'

'My dear Admiral, I but repeat what I said before, that you are running a great risk. I by no means intend to insinuate that the gentlemen who promoted this company

are not sincere and well-intentioned ; *but* I would not risk my own money in it, and am most reluctant to let you risk yours.'

'Your profession inclines you to be distrustful,' replied the Admiral, with an air of knowing what he was about, at which Mr. Trent was secretly amused. 'And having, as I said, informed myself thoroughly in the matter, I have made up my mind to put the whole of the money at my disposal in this undertaking.'

Mr. Trent shook his head.

'Well, Admiral Desbarres, I can say no more. You are of course free to do what you like with your own, but I most emphatically protest that you are acting entirely against my advice.'

'Yes. I absolve you from all responsibility,' he returned, smiling ; '*your* strength lies in unbelief, mine in faith : time only can show which will be justified. I think of leaving town the day after to-morrow. You will be glad to hear that the aunt of one of my young charges—I mean Miss Fielden—has offered a temporary home to her niece.'

'Yes, it is a little lightening of the load,' said Mr. Trent. 'What are you going to do with your ward ?'

'Nothing at all at present ; she is happily placed, as I think I told you. I see she has some exalted idea of maintaining herself by teaching or painting ; however, the question of self-support is a very delicate one where a young girl is concerned.'

'Can she paint ?'

'I am no judge, but I think she can ; her trees look like trees, and her figures like men and women ; but who would buy such unknown work ?'

'It is hard to say. Every one must have a beginning ; at any rate, encourage the spirit of independence. I am sure Mrs. Trent would be very happy to be of any use to her and you. If you like, she will call on your ward. Mrs. Trent is fond of dabbling in artistic matters, and is somehow distantly related to Miss Piers. I never understand relationships, but there is some connection between them.'

'You are very good,' said the Admiral, rising. 'Mrs.

Trent's acquaintance would be a great acquisition to Laura in any case. I hope she and all your family are well. Now I must wish you good-morning.'

'Good-morning, Admiral; I wish you would be guided by me in this Hungarian Canal concern.'

'On my head be it,' said the Admiral. Having satisfied the requirements of his own simple unsuspicious mind, he troubled himself no further, and was only too glad to find he could increase his means of helping others.

The evening before the momentous visit to Mrs. Piers and Lady Jervois had found Mrs. Crewe in a state of advanced preparation for that event. Laura had been occupied the greater part of the afternoon in the composition of a lace collarette. Real lace was an article of almost religious faith with Mrs. Crewe, and in this Laura was not unsympathetic. Lace is always attractive to the artist. It is the poetry of decoration, compared with which, jewels, however magnificent, are vulgarly material.

'I am sure, my dear, you have done that most beautifully, quite like a first-rate milliner,' said Mrs. Crewe, sailing into Laura's room with Toppy on her arm. 'It is absolutely perfect! and now, my dear, what are you going to wear yourself?'

'I have but one dress and one hat I can wear,' said Laura, smiling; 'but I defer to your better judgment, Mrs. Crewe; I bought some white frilling when I went out with Herbert this morning, and I am going to wear it.'

'I am very glad to hear it, dear,' returned Mrs. Crewe solemnly. 'It will be an immense improvement. Would you mind my suggesting a drooping feather in your hat? A black feather is quite admissible in mourning, you know; and I would be most happy to lend you mine which I had in my winter bonnet. It is *real* ostrich; I am sure you will appreciate my motives in offering it and not feel offended.'

'Offended! no, indeed, you are very kind, but, I think, dear Mrs. Crewe, a feather would scarcely be suitable to so plain and quiet a personage as I am. Do not try to lift me out of my natural insignificance,' said Laura, laughing.

'Insignificant or not——' began Mrs. Crewe with a knowing nod of the head, when a knock interrupted her.

A quick 'Come in!' was followed by the appearance of Herbert, looking rather red and dusty, with a large bouquet of exquisite fragrant flowers in one hand, and a note in the other. 'Here, Laura!' he exclaimed, 'just see if there is any answer; there is a smart little chap in cords and tops waiting downstairs, and the Admiral was coming into the garden as I was in the hall.'

'Gracious goodness!' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, in a fever of excitement; 'and I have only eggs and bacon for tea! Is it not unlucky? But what lovely flowers! Do look at the note, Laura dear; of course it is from Mr. Piers. Is it to put us off to-morrow?'

'No! It is only to say he has had these flowers from Pierslynn, and sends them on; he begs me not to forget our appointment for to-morrow.'

'That's right, my dear! I will go down to the Admiral at once. Pray come as quickly as you can; I don't know how it is, I never can keep up a conversation long with that dear kind Admiral.'

When Laura joined them the Admiral, cool and well-dressed, was listening with the honest attention he invariably gave to every one and everything, while Mrs. Crewe, thinking she had hit on a congenial subject, described the clergyman whose church she attended.

'For I never like to neglect church, although as yet my means will not permit me to take a sitting; and I assure you Mr. Middleton is most eloquent. Last Sunday he enlarged upon the Ninth Article—you know it is all about original sin, and that sort of thing—and he was so convincing. I am sure I don't know how any one can help being sinful and going wrong.'

'Is that not a dangerous doctrine,' said the Admiral thoughtfully, 'and one of the most difficult a preacher can attempt to handle? If we admit the taint of birth-sin to its full extent, it is difficult to maintain the responsibility of freewill; and without freewill——'

He paused, and seemed lost in profound and painful thought.

'Exactly so,' returned Mrs. Crewe blandly; 'that is

just what I said to dear Laura as we came out of church. How is one to do right and be spiritually-minded when one is wrong from the beginning? I am sure the thoughts that come in one's head, even when the organ is playing in church, are most extraordinary. But here is Laura herself,' in a tone of relief. 'What lovely flowers! Look, my dear Admiral—are they not? Young Mr. Piers has just sent them; very pretty of him, is it not? He is such a charming young man. Are you going to put them in the drawing-room? Thank you, dear. You are very generous to share such a precious gift; is she not, Admiral?' concluded Mrs. Crewe airily, as she swept away.

Laura advanced with outstretched hand to her guardian,

'It seems so long since I have seen you,' she said, with the soft earnestness which was one of her few attractions.

'I have been much occupied, chiefly on your account and your young cousins,' returned the Admiral. 'I am glad to see that youth is asserting itself,' he continued, gazing with interest at her. 'You are looking wonderfully revived, and better—better than I ever saw you before; and young Piers sent you these flowers? It was a kind and kinsmanly civility. You were friends in your boy-and-girl days?'

'Yes, great friends,' replied Laura frankly.

The Admiral, with old-fashioned politeness, offered his arm to take his ward to the dining-room.

'I never apologise for humble fare which is heartily offered,' said Mrs. Crewe, with a distinguished air. 'Mine is a very modest household, as no one has a better right to know than yourself, Admiral Desbarres, and such as it is, you are always a favoured guest. Bacon and eggs may not be fashionable, but it is a most nourishing and—pray sit on my right, Admiral; Laura, go next your guardian; Herbert, like a dear boy, blow out the spirit-lamp for me. Collins, do bring my precious Toppy; put her chair by me. I trust, my dear Admiral, you do not mind my little favourite coming to table.'

'These dumb creatures are a curious study,' said the Admiral. 'They seem to have the germ of much that characterises human beings. I remember a pet monkey we had on board the *Revenge* when I was a youngster. He

used to sleep in a different berth every night, sometimes in the first lieutenant's cabin, sometimes at one of the mates' doors ; but he never went so low as to associate with the midshipmen, except in broad daylight.'

'How extraordinary !' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe.

'How do you account for that, sir ?' asked Herbert, curiosity loosening his tongue. 'Did he ever sleep with the captain ?'

'The captain would not have him.'

'He could not have known the difference of rank,' said Herbert.

'Perhaps the midshipmen teased him more than the others,' said Laura.

'Perhaps so, but he never seemed to dislike the teasing,' concluded the Admiral. 'I only know the facts. In small as well as great things our understanding is very limited ;' and he remained silent until Mrs. Crewe suggested that the Admiral would probably like to go into the drawing-room with Laura, where she would join them presently.

'Let me see you before I go,' said the general benefactor to Herbert, and he followed his ward into the next room. 'I am going to leave you, my dear Laura ; I return home on Thursday. My sister is not well ; I think I have mentioned that she is highly nervous, and I have been away from her for a long time.'

'You have indeed !' exclaimed Laura, 'and for our sakes. You have been so good that I feel it is beyond thanks. How lonely I shall feel when you are gone ; and yet I should feel much worse if Mrs. Crewe were not so kind ; this quiet home is another debt to you.'

'I am convinced of your gratitude,' said the Admiral calmly. 'You are my particular charge, and I think you are a girl of principle : but I much incline to believe that you have a ground-tier of self-will. Not that you have ever opposed me, but I have observed you closely, and I counsel you to subdue any tendency to wilfulness when you perceive it arise, my dear Laura.'

Laura listened in no small surprise.

'I am not aware of it,' she said ; 'but I will watch myself.'

'I have had a letter from your cousin, from which I can see she is not pleased with her relations or her reception ; does she write in the same strain to you ?'

'Just the same,' returned Laura, earnestly hoping he would not ask to see the letter.

'The beginning is painful in most things, and strange places and people are often unattractive ; but Winnie may grow to like her aunt and cousins. She is herself so lovable that she will no doubt make friends wherever she goes.'

'She is indeed ; and oh, what a loss to me !'

'That I can understand,' replied the Admiral kindly. 'However, I am a little afraid of her making vain and imprudent efforts at self-support ; if she can make herself useful and acceptable to her aunt, it would be better than to run any risk among strangers.'

'But, dear guardian, do you not think that even young girls have a right to try and earn their own living ?'

'With certain restrictions, yes.'

'I am deeply interested in your opinion,' cried Laura 'because I want to sell my pictures if I can.'

The Admiral smiled indulgently.

'Yes, yes, I know you young creatures are led away with a dream of independence ; you think if you can but fill your purse you can be free ; you forget that time alone can set you free from your apprenticeship—from the duty of obedience to those whom nature or circumstances, which are God's bylaws, have set over you. Nevertheless, I do not say that the ambition is altogether wrong. Paint your pictures, Laura, but do not go abroad to sell them. Let me know when you have something to dispose of, and we will see what can be done.'

'I have some ready,' cried Laura, her heart palpitating with eagerness ; 'one or two copies of pictures in the gallery, the Dresden Gallery, and two scenes in Saxon Switzerland. They are here now—they came in our heavy boxes ; may I show them to you ?' and she rose.

'It would be useless, Laura ; I have no knowledge of such things, and little taste for them ; I prefer to talk with you. Mr. Trent, my solicitor, has proposed that his wife, who is some relation of yours, should call upon you.

If she asks to see your paintings, let her see them ; she is perhaps able and willing to help you.'

'Did she say she would come and see me ? how very kind !' cried Laura ; 'why, I am gathering quite a circle of acquaintance. I forgot to tell you that Reginald's mother and sister called a day or two before Winnie left, but we were out.'

'Indeed !' said the Admiral, visibly gratified. 'They are no doubt cognisant of the kindness shown to young Piers in the Rectory days. Now tell me, Laura, how are you off for money ? I know you are prudent, but I do not wish you to be penniless.'

'Oh, thank you !' exclaimed Laura, colouring. 'I have the money you brought me almost untouched. I only wish I had not to live upon your bounty.'

'There is the pride and self-will of which I spoke,' said the Admiral, not unkindly ; 'you know I have gladly charged myself with the care of your future. I only hesitate to undertake that of your cousin, because I do not yet see clearly that it is given to me.'

'No pride could be hurt by an obligation to you,' replied Laura warmly ; while she thought, 'By what instinct does he divine my rebellion against authority—even his kind authority ? for I have never disobeyed him ; yet how essential freedom is to my very existence !'

But this conversation comforted Laura. The Admiral was so absolutely true and sincere that the lightest word with him was binding as the solemnest vow, and she firmly believed that poor Winnie's evil days would not last long.

CHAPTER IX.

THE important Wednesday broke mistily, with gusts of rain and wind. Mrs. Crewe was loud in her lamentations at the untoward change of weather.

'It makes such a mess of one's clothes,' she said, as she endeavoured to discover a morsel of blue sky in the square portion visible over the back garden. 'And there is that dear Toppy washing her face as hard as she can, which is

a sure sign of a wet day ! Don't you think, Laura dear, we might share a cab from the Marble Arch—it would be money well spent—and then we would go in at Lady Jervois's nice and fresh instead of being draggled and splashed and untidy ? I don't want you to look like a poor relation——'

'Well, nor do I, though I am one.' returned Laura, laughing ; 'let us have the cab, by all means'

'It will be just tenpence each, omnibus included,' said Mrs. Crewe, making a rapid calculation ; 'and, if you do not mind a cold luncheon at half-past twelve, it will give us time to dress and get to Mount Street by two o'clock.'

The moment of giving their names to the serious-looking man out of livery who opened the door was one of no small trial. Laura could not reason herself out of the mingled apprehension and excitement with which she looked forward to the ordeal of introduction to Reginald's mother and sister.

Why should she dread meeting people who had gone out of their way to show her civility ? But though there was no satisfactory answer to this question, she could not quiet the rapid throbbing of her pulses, nor attend to the whispered observations of Mrs. Crewe, who, with an air of haughty self-possession, uttered sharp comments under her breath : 'The stair-carpets are shockingly shabby,' and, 'What a dusty landing !' 'The paint does not look very fresh,' etc. Next moment the door was flung open, and their names called out in loud tones :

'Mrs. Crewe and Miss Piers.'

But there, just within the threshold, stood Reginald, erect, fresh, smiling. At sight of him, new courage sprang up in Laura's heart.

In an easy-chair near the window, with a small work-table beside her, sat a refined-looking elderly lady, whose quietly-rich morning-dress was well suited to a dowager of distinction ; and in the middle distance, a small, delicate, pretty woman, in a simple *écrù* costume, with pale-blue ribbons and a 'Corday' cap, was looking at an illustrated paper.

The whole scene stamped itself on Laura's memory once and for ever: the somewhat dingy ready-furnished look of the room, the perfume of the heliotrope and roses which were its best ornaments, the indefinable air of assured position stamped upon its occupants. Finally, the image of herself reflected in a long glass between the windows facing her as she came in, so black, so insignificant, in her scarf and large hat. She did not observe, what Reginald did, that there was something dignified in her composure, something pleasant in the honest steadiness of her eyes, which saved her from being commonplace. The reflection of Mrs. Crewe was also a little incongruous; her height was overpowering, and though slight rather than stout, she had large ways. While these thoughts were flashing through her mind, Reginald was greeting them cordially.

'Very good of you to come out in such horrid weather, Mrs. Crewe. Let me introduce you to my mother. My sister, Lady Jervois, Mrs. Crewe. Mother, let me present my old playfellow, Laura Piers, to you; you have often heard me talk of her and of the Fieldens.'

Mrs. Piers rose, and, stepping a few inches forward, made a slight stiff courtesy, first to Mrs. Crewe, then to Laura, and, after a scarce perceptible hesitation, held out her hand to the latter.

'Very happy to see you—won't you sit down?'

Lady Jervois came forward smilingly, and said she was very pleased to make their acquaintance, but she too only offered her hand to Laura. Mrs. Crewe was an outsider, who must be, as it were, kept beyond the barriers, all of which was perfectly perceptible to Mrs. Crewe, who by nature and grace was peculiarly qualified to penetrate and appreciate the mystic cabala of society. She showed no sign, however, only from the reserved force of family connections evoked the shade of her noble great-grandfather, and held him in readiness for a decisive moment.

'I was very sorry to hear of Mr. Fielden's death,' said Mrs. Piers, looking earnestly at Laura, her countenance relaxing as she looked. 'It has been a sad loss to his family.'

'A terrible loss, one we feel more and more each day,' returned Laura; and Reginald thought that a voice so

sweet and clear and delicately refined was in itself a beauty.

'No doubt. You were brought up with the family, my son tells me,' said Mrs. Piers, whose manner was coldly polite.

'I never knew any father or mother except my Uncle and Aunt Fielden,' replied Laura.

'Yes! Laura was poor Mr. Fielden's special favourite,' put in Reginald; 'she was his secretary and right hand. He kept you pretty close, too, Laura! Do you remember the day we were going to see the sheep-shearing at Oatlands and you could not come because your uncle had to finish something by post-time, and you were obliged to copy, or look up authorities, or some such thing? It was awfully hard lines! I remember you tried to hide the tears, but *I* saw them, eh, Laura?'

'Yes, it was a fearful disappointment,' said Laura, with a sad little smile at the memory.

'So it was to me—by Jove! I did not enjoy the expedition a bit without you.'

Mrs. Piers looked curiously at her son.

Meantime Lady Jervois, with some difficulty, started a conversation with Mrs. Crewe.

'Sorry not to find you at home the other day! I had no idea Westbourne Park was such a nice neighbourhood. Have you been residing there long?'

'Nearly two years—yes, it is pretty well for a suburb,' said Mrs. Crewe magnificently, 'but if I had more of this world's goods, it is not the situation I should choose. However, I need not say that a sailor's widow has not much power of choice, and I was a good deal influenced by the advice of my dear friend Rear-Admiral Desbarres (an old mess-mate of my late husband's) in the choice of residence.'

'Oh! indeed,' said Lady Jervois. 'It's rather a long way out.'

'The omnibuses are very convenient,' rejoined Mrs. Crewe, who disdained concealing her mode of locomotion.

'Are you going to make any stay in town?' asked Mrs. Piers.

'Yes,' said Laura; 'I think my home in future will be with Mrs. Crewe.'

'Have you seen the Academy Exhibition?' asked Lady Jervois.

'Not yet,' said Laura; 'it is almost the only thing I care to see—'

'Very well,' remarked Reginald. 'We must go, and I shall listen with deference to your criticisms! Miss Piers is an artist herself, Helen.'

'I am very fond of painting, but I fear I have small claim to the title of artist,' returned Laura, colouring faintly.

'Indeed you will allow me to say, though perhaps I am no great judge, that you have a decided genius,' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe. 'I assure you,' addressing Mrs. Piers, 'there are some heads (one especially of an old man in a turban) which my friend Miss Piers did in Germany, that look absolutely alive. perfectly wonderful! Then she is making a charming picture of my favourite cat—a great pet—such an intelligent darling!—and she is also painting a sweet landscape—that pretty thing with trees and a pool of water, Laura—it reminds me of a part of my great-grandfather's woods at Coomb, Lord Denzil of Coomb—perhaps you know the family?'

'I know whom you mean, but am not acquainted with any of them,' said Mrs. Piers icily.

'It must be very nice to paint,' said Lady Jervois. 'Used you to copy in the Dresden Gallery?'

'Yes, occasionally.'

'You must let me see your pictures, Laura,' said Reginald. 'I will come to-morrow about two, if you will let me, and turn over the contents of your studio; of course you have a studio?'

'No, I regret to say not as yet,' said Mrs. Crewe loftily; 'we have scarcely settled down; but I hope to keep my young friend with me for a long time, and I have a very nice breakfast-room opening to the garden, which I shall certainly give her for an *atelier*! The exercise of talent such as hers should not be impeded.'

'Certainly not. And, Laura, you must come down to Pierslynn and immortalise some of our "banks and braes." Eh, mother, we must get Laura down there, and let her paint to her heart's content!'

Mrs. Piers smiled—not a cordial smile. 'You are the

master, Reginald,' she said ; 'it is for you to invite the guests.' Then, turning to Laura, 'I was sorry not to see Miss Fielden when I called. Reginald owes many pleasant days to her father's hospitality.'

'Oh yes ! Reginald was quite one of us at the Rectory ; we always enjoyed his visits,' returned Laura, with unconscious familiarity ; and she looked kindly and frankly at him.

Mrs. Piers's delicate cheek flushed slightly, and, in spite of a lifetime of social training, her brow contracted with a momentary expression of annoyance at this indication of intimacy.

But Laura did not notice it—for Reginald, bending a little towards her, said very distinctly, 'They were my happiest days.'

And Lady Jervois followed up the speech quickly by saying, 'Miss Fielden has left town, has she not ?'

'She has gone to stay with her aunt in Liverpool,' replied Laura.

Then something was said about regret at leaving town so soon, and not being able to see Miss Piers again ; and Lady Jervois explained that they were going to her brother's place in a few days, to await Sir Gilbert's return ; and then, to Laura's relief, Mrs. Crewe rose to take leave.

'I will come too,' said Reginald, with the same easy cordiality he had shown all through the visit. 'How are you going back ?' he asked, as they issued from the house.

'It is not raining now,' said Mrs. Crewe, 'and we have a little shopping to do before our return, so we will make our way to Regent Street.'

'Very well. Where to—Howell and James's ?

'No, to Jay's.'

'But you have not told me if I may come to-morrow and see the paintings. Eh, Mrs. Crewe ?'

'Oh ! my dear Mr. Piers, you are most welcome as far as I am concerned,' said that lady graciously.

'If you really care, Reginald, I shall be very pleased to show you my work ; but I did not think you would be troubled with such things.'

'I am more artistic in my tastes than you fancy !'

They talked pleasantly until they reached the well-

known emporium, where Reginald left them, with a parting pressure of the hand, and the words, ‘At two, then, to-morrow.’

‘Well, my dear ! and what did you think of our visit ?’ said Mrs. Crewe, as she settled herself in her favourite chair, her feet on a footstool, and Toppy curled up luxuriously in her lap.

‘There is not much to think about,’ said Laura, who was sitting by the open window in unusual idleness. ‘It was all very commonplace. Mrs. Piers is very different from Reginald ! I do not think she was particularly glad to see us.’

‘And I think,’ said Mrs. Crewe, with candour and decision, ‘that she is a most forbidding, contemptuous person ! Lady Jervois is much nicer, much better bred ! How that elegant, charming, delightful young man can be her son (I mean Mrs. Piers’s) I cannot imagine ! But, Laura, my dear, I understand it all—to me it is as plain as A B C. That woman is afraid of *you*; she sees that nice son of hers is devotedly attached to *you*, and she is enraged at his constancy ! Now do not interrupt me, Laura. I am sure you are superior to mock modesty, and I am also sure you cannot be indifferent to your cousin ; it would not be human nature.’

‘Mrs. Crewe, I beg of you——’ began poor Laura.

‘Do hear me out,’ cried Mrs. Crewe persistently. ‘Don’t let any ridiculous false pride come between you and fortune, happiness, and your bounden duty. Why you should be blind, or pretend to be blind, to Mr. Piers’s intentions, I cannot understand !’

‘You would understand, Mrs. Crewe,’ said Laura, seriously distressed, and eager to disabuse her hostess’s mind of the unfortunate impression she had so readily adopted—‘you would understand if you knew the terms we were on at Cheddington. Why, he used to tell me his love affairs, and I used to darn his socks—and he used to talk to me as if I were sure to be an old maid—that is, till the last time, when I suppose he was old enough to think it uncivil. He was always fond of me in a way, I think, because I understood him. But to fall in *love*

with me ! dear Mrs. Crewe, you don't know how he adores beauty, or you would never dream of such a thing.'

'There is no accounting for such feelings,' returned that lady, with more candour than courtesy.

'It is just the old kindly brotherly feeling that brings him here. If you talk in this way you will destroy my comfort in seeing him. If you will only leave him alone —well—I will readily promise to accept him if he proposes for me, but only on condition that you never say anything more about the possibility of such an event ;' and with a pleasant caressing smile, Laura took Mrs. Crewe's hand.

'Very good,' returned that lady, who was easily mollified, 'I agree ; but I must just once more say that I firmly believe I shall see you mistress of Pierslynn before many months are over.'

Then Mrs. Crewe produced a letter from her son which had arrived during her absence. 'Dear boy,' she said, 'he is just going to leave the Cape—for a place called Rio—and hopes to see me before three months are over. I think you will be very pleased with Denzil, Laura ; he is so intellectual and refined. He is as much a gentleman as if he were on board a flagship !'

When Laura was at last alone she could not regulate the thronging crowd of thoughts that passed through her brain, and stood long, her hand resting on the dressing-table, seeing visions of the old time and the new.

Poor Mrs. Crewe's imaginings were simply the dream of a kind, commonplace person, whose idea of feminine good fortune could reach no farther than a rich marriage, and was quite incapable of conceiving friendship between man and woman ; still, strive for mastery as she would over the suggestions of fancy, Laura could not quite turn from the glories suggested by her good-natured friend's conjectures ; it was delightful enough to find Reginald so true and frank and kindly, but if it were possible that he should love her ! the confines of mortal mould would be too narrow to hold her enraptured spirit !

She knew how fondly she had cherished the memory of her gay, gallant, good-looking playfellow in the innermost depths of her soul, where none could see her weakness, not even Winnie. And in this secrecy was her strength.

Never had she deceived herself as to the quality of Reginald's feelings, and the discovery of her own warmer affection, which dawned upon her with the growing wisdom of womanhood, had brought with it the bitterest mortification. To love, when that love was unsought, was degradation; and to hide and conquer the intense longing for a return of what she gave became the supreme effort of her life. Nor was it unsuccessful.

Round Reginald still centred her tenderest interest, her most artistic imaginings, but his love she had ceased to long for, or regret, or regard as in any way possible. Now she could hold his hand with unquickened pulse. She could look into his eyes with the calmest, most sisterly glance. Yet the love was not dead, but slept, ready to spring into life at the touch of the master's hand.

Within Laura's plain unattractive exterior was enshrined a soul of rare power, keen to perceive beauty, to recognise all that was noble and true, unstinted in generous self-devotion to those she loved, and quick to resent injustice. Yet she was only just a good sensible girl, but decidedly plain, in the sight of all her kinsfolk and acquaintance, except Winnie, who firmly believed in Laura's genius and knowledge.

'Oh, I do hope Mrs. Crewe will leave me in peace! her words rouse up old follies. I shall lose all if I lose my friendship with Reginald—I want nothing more—yet—' and even her thoughts became indistinct at the recollection of his last look.

At last, with a supreme effort, she roused herself, and taking a tough German book to bed with her, read resolutely until she had brought her imagination within bounds.

CHAPTER X.

THE little downstairs parlour was a haven of refuge to Laura. There she could spread out the implements of her art, and leave them undisturbed, to return to when she could. There Mrs. Crewe occasionally descended with Toppy on her shoulder, and gave utterance to her admira-

tion and approbation in the largest capitals. There, too, were Miss Brown and Mr. Brown solemnly introduced to view the progress of the fine arts as exemplified by Miss Piers's brush and pencil. There Herbert tried chemical experiments, creating horrible odours. Above all, there Reginald lounged in the early afternoon or evening, criticising, praising, disputing, talking of himself and his plans, his hopes, his ambitions, very much as in the Cheddington days.

He had taken Laura to several of the exhibitions and galleries ; he had presented Mrs. Crewe with a box at one or other of the theatres on several occasions, much to that lady's gratification ; and, above all, he had more than once partaken of tea-dinner, with great apparent content, praised the veal-and-ham pie, and declared the pressed beef worthy of all commendation.

Meantime Laura felt almost faithless to be so happy when dear Winnie was sad and alone.

Winnie's letters had not increased in cheerfulness. For the first couple of weeks Aunt Morgan had been very pleasant, and 'uncle' less morose ; then the former had suggested that while Winnie was looking about, and she herself not suited with a governess, her niece might as well hear Fanny practise, and give both younger girls lessons in German, with occasional instructions in 'conversation' to Amelia. So Winnie found herself an unpaid governess, with an infinitely more difficult task as regards discipline than a stranger would have had.

Still poor Winnie wrote bravely, though here and there touching little phrases expressive of helpless despondency escaped her pen. Yet she forbade Laura communicating the true condition of things to the Admiral.

'I write to him every week,' she said, 'as truly but as cheerfully as I can, and it is evidently his intention that I should endure until it is unendurable.'

Laura understood the spirit that upheld Winnie in her courageous obedience.

'If I could but have her with me !' was Laura's cry ; and then Reginald would whisper mysterious consolation.

'Don't make yourself miserable, Laura. Let me go

and see the Admiral ; I will go as soon as ever I settle my mother at Pierslynn, and then—we shall see.'

One of the pleasantest episodes of this pleasant time was a visit from Mrs. Trent, who was abundantly civil—quite sunny—ready to agree with anything and everything : she had been away, she said, to Southsea with her youngest girl, who had lately recovered from whooping-cough and required change, or she would have sooner done herself the pleasure of calling on Miss Piers and Mrs. Crewe. Had they seen the Admiral lately ? Miss Piers was fortunate to have such a guardian. Mr. Trent—though, like most men of business, exceedingly unimpressionable—was quite impressed by Admiral Desbarres. Had Miss Piers been long in Germany ? ‘Three years ! How nice ! I have only paid flying visits to the principal towns during our legal holidays, and always longed to make myself better acquainted with the country. I am told you are an artist, Miss Piers. May I see some of your pictures ? I am a humble lover of art myself——’

‘Indeed, I have nothing worth looking at !’ said Laura.

‘Nonsense, my dear,’ put in Mrs. Crewe loftily. ‘Pray show Mrs. Trent the studio, as she is so good as to take an interest in your work. Do take Mrs. Trent downstairs, Laura. Mine is but a tiny mansion,’ continued Mrs. Crewe, ‘but we can contrive a home for art within its limits.’

‘I am sure it is charmingly pretty and sweet,’ returned Mrs. Trent amiably, while she listened to Laura’s aside :

‘The place is all in disorder, and Reggie has been smoking there this morning.’

‘Never mind, dear, a studio never is orderly ; and I am sure I don’t know the morning that Mr. Piers has *not* been smoking there,’ with a significant look at Mrs. Trent which fortunately escaped Laura.

‘If you really care to see any of my attempts,’ said Laura, ‘I will bring one or two for you to look at,’ and she left the room.

‘You see a good deal of Mr. Piers, I suppose,’ observed Mrs. Trent.

‘A great deal,’ returned Mrs. Crewe ; ‘and a very charming young man he is, so unaffected and unspoiled with all this wonderful change of fortune.’

'Quite so,' acquiesced Mrs. Trent. 'We were always fond of Reginald, and saw a good deal of him formerly. I believe the Pierslynn property is a very fine one. Do you know Mrs. Piers and Lady Jervois ?'

'Slightly ; we have exchanged visits,' said Mrs. Crewe, with supreme elegant nonchalance. 'But Mr. Piers is naturally a good deal here ; his old friendship with——'

It is impossible to say of what imprudence Mrs. Crewe might not have been guilty, but that Laura's return interrupted her.

'This is rather a large picture, but as it was a favourite of my uncle's, I copied it in the same size as the original. It is in the Dresden Gallery, and is by a pupil of Rembrandt.'

'It is evidently an excellent copy,' said Mrs. Trent, stepping backwards till she got it into a proper light. 'Your flesh-tint is very good, and that white turban must have been difficult ; really, Miss Piers, you have a great deal of talent ; and these smaller pictures ?'

'These I painted from nature ; that is a little study of rocks and trees near Königstein ; and this is a bit of the Elbe in Saxon Switzerland,—a sunset.'

'Very charming, very sweet,' remarked Mrs. Trent, evidently a little surprised. 'I hope you will not be displeased if I ask you to let me carry these pictures away with me : Mr. Trent understood from Admiral Desbarres that you would not object to sell some of your paintings.'

'Object !' exclaimed Laura, flushing with pleasure at this opening, 'I should only be too glad to sell any of them, or to get an order—as artists say—but I fear the head is too large for your carriage to hold conveniently.'

'Oh, I shall manage it,' said Mrs. Trent. 'I am not able, you understand, to be myself a patron of art, but I have a friend who is a great picture-fancier, and he might possibly fancy one of these ; I should like this Elbe picture myself—pray, what do you expect for it ?'

'Oh, I have no idea what to ask,' cried Laura, smiling ; 'I should be quite satisfied with whatever you would like to give.'

'Indeed,' said Mrs. Crewe, stepping forward, 'I often tell my dear young friend that genius like hers, if known,

would command a high price, and I want her very much to try what a real judge of painting would offer for her charming pictures. We have a very artistic neighbour, who is of opinion that Miss Piers ought to exhibit in——oh, I forget the name of the gallery, and then she would ascertain her true value—it is not well to underrate one's self.'

'Exactly so,' said Mrs. Trent blandly, 'and that is just what those horrid picture-dealers who frequent the galleries would do; they would persuade Miss Piers that her work was mere daubing. You are content to leave the affair in my hands? Trust me, I shall do the best I can for you.'

'I am most grateful to you for this help,' said Laura warmly.

'Ahem! Miss Piers is quite enthusiastic in her artistic ardour,' said Mrs. Crewe. 'But don't you think, my dear——' turning to her——'it would be as well to consult your cousin before you part with them? He takes such a deep interest in all that concerns you, I think it would be only right——'

'Oh! I do not see any necessity,' interrupted Laura, a little surprised; 'Reginald will be very pleased to know that I have a chance of selling anything——'

'Very well, Miss Piers, I hope I may bring you good fortune.' Then Mrs. Trent rose, and Collins was summoned to assist the footman to carry the pictures to the handsome double brougham in waiting, while Mrs. Trent took a gracious farewell of her young relative and Mrs. Crewe.

'I hope to see more of you,' she said, smiling; 'and as soon as I can fix a day I trust Mrs. Crewe and yourself will come and dine with us *sans cérémonie*.'

'How very nice and kind she is!' cried Laura impulsively.

'Ye—es—a very neat turn-out indeed,' said Mrs. Crewe, looking out; 'a pair of dark chestnuts, coachman *and* footman—well, well, it has taken a great many six-and-eightpences to pay for all that, and I must say she is a stylish well-mannered woman. Did you observe, Laura, she had a "Marie Stuart" bonnet and a fringe! and real Spanish lace on her mantle; but—I don't know how it is—I feel a sort of distrust! I do not like her carrying off

your pictures in that way ; depend upon it, she will not get half their value for you ; there is something under it all I cannot understand. Laura, does it strike you ?'

'No, not at all, Mrs. Crewe ; I see nothing whatever but simple good-nature, suggested, no doubt, by the Admiral. Why should we suspect evil ?'

'Ah ! my dear, when you have seen as much of life as I have, you will be as distrustful of appearances ! If there is one thing on which I specially pique myself it is insight into character. And should Mrs. Trent invite us to dinner (which is far from certain), what shall I wear ? and what have *you* in the way of toilette ?'

In the lazy after-dinner time of the same day, when the children had had their share of dessert, fulfilled their unconscious task of amusing 'Papa,' and gone to bed, Mr. and Mrs. Trent were left alone. 'Monsieur' was half asleep in his chair, the evening paper slipping from his hand, and 'Madame,' in her cool, careful demi-toilette of gray silk and white lace, had put down the morsel of fancy work with which she had been playing.

The room was deliciously dusk and fresh, the odour of cut grass and flowers stealing in from the gardens on which the windows opened, the small Sutherland tea-table, with its burden of delicate china and graceful silver, still standing where it had been placed an hour ago against a back-ground of leaves and blossoms, which filled up and hid the fireplace, the whole apartment expressive of the well-ordered luxury which distinguishes a wealthy English middle-class home.

'I called on that Miss Piers to-day,' said Mrs. Trent, after a silence of some minutes.

'Well, you ought to have gone long ago ! why, it is more than ten days since the Admiral left town,' said Mr. Trent rather gruffly.

'And only three since I returned to it,' replied Mrs. Trent with unruffled composure. 'Do you know, John, I really believe Reginald is smitten with that very plain friend of his youth—Laura Piers. It is evident he goes to see her every day.'

'Hum ! what is she like ?'

'She is a bundle of negatives—neither tall nor short, nor dark nor fair, nor absolutely ugly nor decidedly ungraceful: just the sort of girl men would pass over without seeing; and yet Reginald goes every morning and smokes in some den of a painting-room she has underground.'

'Oh! He will take care of himself—he is ambitious, I can tell you! He is not at all the kind of fellow to make a foolish marriage.'

'I don't know—I think beauty goes a long way with him; yet this Miss Piers is decidedly plain.'

'I thought she was not "decidedly" anything.'

'Don't be contradictory, John!—I admit there is something pleasing and ladylike in her manners, and her voice is peculiarly sweet—otherwise she is supremely commonplace; but what impresses me with the idea that Reginald is more closely *lié* with his cousin than we think is, that he came here yesterday, quite late in the afternoon, and begged me to go see the young artist and her works; moreover, he requested me to expend twenty pounds for him in the purchase of some of her pictures, as he knew she wanted money, and did not know how to help her.'

'A very pretty bit of romance,' said Mr. Trent, with a quick, mocking smile. 'Could he not hand twenty pounds to the Admiral for her use?'

'Perhaps the Admiral would not take it; at any rate, I performed the commission, and brought away three pictures. She paints very well; I should rather like to take one myself—I think it would look well.'

'What would you do with it?'

'I do not know—I am going to ask Katie's drawing-master to look at them—'

'Oh, as to value, that's "nil," I fancy—but buy one if you like, only do not be too romantically generous as to price; I think you give your imagination too much play about young Piers—he is a very cool hand. Why did you not keep him to dinner yesterday?'

'He was engaged to a county neighbour, Lord Midhurst, who seems very civil to him. The present member for North Saltshire is very old and in bad health.'

There was a long pause.

'When does Katie come back?' Mr. Trent asked suddenly.

Mrs. Trent, who had been watching him, smiled slightly, and replied :

'On Wednesday or Thursday next, and then I was going to propose asking Miss Laura Piers and Reginald to dinner.'

'I don't see the necessity—but I daresay you have some object in it I don't understand!'

'Really, John! you credit me with more depth than I possess. My object is simply to show civility to the Admiral's *protégée* and Reginald's cousin,' returned Mrs. Trent, with a good-humoured laugh. 'Does Reginald never go to the office now?'

'Never,' returned Mr. Trent sharply. 'He intends leaving his affairs in the hands of Fanshawe and Green, the late man's advisers.'

'Well—I think it is rather ungrateful of him, considering your kindness in taking him into the office on the terms you did.'

'Nonsense!' said Mr. Trent tartly; 'it is nothing of the kind. It is quite natural he should employ the men who have always managed the property; and we—we can do without his business.'

'Oh, no doubt!' returned Mrs. Trent soothingly, while she thought to herself, 'He does not like it, though.'

'Reginald is wonderfully quiet and unassuming,' she resumed aloud, 'considering it is really a case of a beggar set on horseback.'

'Wait——' said Mr. Trent cynically; 'he has not been in the saddle quite three months; I believe there is not a prouder, more ambitious young fellow in England than Reggie Piers! You'll see he will slowly turn his back on every one, but he is far too knowing to do it suddenly.'

'Come, come! you are a little unjust: I have a great regard for Reginald! Would you like the lamp, or candles? I am going to see the children in bed.'

'Well, ring, and I will tell Thomas to bring the lamp.'

The possibility of selling her pictures, of earning enough for herself, suggested by Mrs. Trent's visit, was the crown-

ing item in Laura's happiness. Of course the Admiral and Winnie were duly informed of the great fact. The former wrote a grave but not too cordial approval. He earnestly warned his dear ward not to expect too high a remuneration. He himself sincerely admired her work, but large allowance must be made for the partiality he felt for his ward. He himself cared little or nothing as regarded the question of her independence. He was, or would be, better off than hitherto, and looked on her as a sacred charge.

'Well! he really is a *darling!*' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, after she had perused this letter which Laura handed to her. 'I wonder if he has come into money? Do you think he has? If so, it will be the better for you, my dear! I protest, Laura, you are a lucky girl.'

'Yes! I think I am,' she returned. 'Whether any one leaves me money or not, the best of all would be to sell my pictures.'

'Pooh, nonsense! You will never need to sell them, or anything else. Eh, Mr. Piers?'

For while she spoke the door had opened to admit Reginald.

'The fact of their being saleable is a sort of hall-mark, however,' returned Reginald; 'what has brought the matter on the tapis?'

'Because,' exclaimed Laura eagerly, 'your charming friend Mrs. Trent was here the day before yesterday, and took away three of my pictures, hoping to dispose of them; was it not kind of her?'

'To take away your pictures—I am not sure. I hope she will get a good price for them. You must let me have your present work, "A Glade near Cheddington;" will you not, Laura? And what did Mrs. Trent carry away?' asked Reginald, looking round. 'Oh! the Dresden head, and those two Saxon landscapes. How have you been getting on with the water?—very good—you have done a good deal.'

'I worked a long while yesterday,' said Laura. 'I have had a long letter from Winnie, and I am afraid she is getting quite worn out with those dreadful cousins of hers; I don't imagine Mrs. Morgan is at all nice. I think

seriously of trying to find music lessons for her here. I intend writing to the Admiral about it—'

'Wait,' interrupted Reginald, with some eagerness; 'promise me to do nothing till I return.'

'Return—where are you going, Reggie?'

'To Pierslynn, with my mother and sister—only for a few days. You will miss me a little—eh, Laura?'

'Oh! I shall miss you very much; but of course I must get accustomed to that. I cannot suppose I shall always see as much of you as I do now.'

'Why not, Laura?' then, after a short pause, 'I have made a sort of plan of life—I will tell you all about it when I come back—will you help me to carry it out?'

'Yes, if I can; but how can I do anything for *you*?'

'I will tell you by and by, and then we can see what can be done for Winnie. I must go now; I only came to tell you that I shall not see you for a week; and here—if you and Mrs. Crewe would care to hear "Rigoletto" to-morrow night—I have got a box for you on the second tier.'

'Thanks, you are really very good. We shall be delighted. When do you go to Pierslynn?'

'To-morrow. My mother is very sorry she could not see you before she left town, but she has been busy about her new house. When she is settled I hope you will see a great deal of her.'

'I hope so.'

'Good-bye, then, Laura—or rather *au revoir*, for I shall not be many days away; and you are to pray for me night and morning, remember,' he said, with a pleasant laugh. 'And here is a new photograph I have had taken of my noble self; you see, I do not trust to your unassisted memory.'

'But I think you may, Reginald. I have not so many friends that I should forget one so kind and true as yourself.'

Reginald's answer was to catch her hand and kiss it twice very warmly; adding 'Say good-bye for me to Mrs. Crewe,' who, as usual, had left them together.

Laura looked after him puzzled, agitated, almost terrified at the possibilities suggested by his mode of taking leave. What interpretation could she put on his evident reluctance

to part from her even for a few days, save that he loved her with love passing that of a brother? The idea made her tremble; she dared not use her brush, and, laying aside her palette, she began mechanically to arrange the rather miscellaneous furniture of her little room.

CHAPTER XI.

A FEW days later Laura Piers sat at work in the dining-room by the open window, feeling unreasonably depressed and sad. Mrs. Crewe, with Toppy on her lap, was nodding over yesterday's *Times*, and Herbert was composing with pain and grief an epistle to the Admiral, his fingers dyed an inch high in ink, one cheek almost touching his left hand, as if his nose were ambitious of assisting to guide the pen.

'That's done!' he said at last. 'I've put my name and all, for it is quite a long letter! Just look over it, like a good girl, will you?' and he began to put away his writing materials. 'I say,' he resumed, after a pause, 'I would much rather go to sea than stew over Latin and Greek! I ain't one bit the sort of fellow for the Church! I tell you what, when Mrs. Crewe's son comes home, I'll talk to him about it. *I have no objection to the Mercantile Marine.*'

'What is that about?' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, rousing up at the sound of the detested name. 'Who did you say was in the Mercantile Marine?'

'No one. But I should like well enough to be in it,' returned Herbert.

'Don't think of such a thing, my dear boy. No, no; how much nicer it would be to go into the Church, as the dear Admiral wishes; so much more dignified and gentleman-like; perhaps getting to be a bishop with those elegant lawn sleeves and a seat in the House of Lords—think of that!—instead of knocking about on a horrid dirty ship with all sorts of second-rate people; obliged to dip your hands in a tar-bucket to fit yourself for the service—so a very nice young man Denzil brought up here one day told me, though Denzil had suppressed the fact in consideration for my feelings.'

'Oh, I should like sailing about and seeing all sorts of places well enough, and I would not mind the tar-bucket,' said Herbert. 'You must ask your son to take me with him when he goes to sea again,' and he left the room with a good-humoured nod.

'I am sure the Admiral would be greatly displeased if such an idea took hold of Herbert,' said Mrs. Crewe, looking after him. 'You must do your best to put it out of his head, Laura.'

'The best plan is to do nothing,' replied Laura languidly. 'He merely talks; he has no strong likings—as to a profession I mean. Do you not think it is very oppressive this evening, Mrs. Crewe, as if we were going to have a thunderstorm?'

She dropped her work as she spoke, with an unconscious desponding gesture, and, leaning back in her chair, passed her hand over her brow.

'No! I do not find it oppressive, Laura; but I do see that you are depressed, and I am not surprised at it,' Mrs. Crewe was beginning, when almost immediately there was a sharp ring at the front-door bell. It was the postman, who delivered for Laura a perfumed cream-coloured note, with a dainty blue monogram.

Laura opened it eagerly, glanced at the contents, uttered a little scream of delight, and cried, 'Dear, dearest Mrs. Crewe—what do you think—'

'Has he written to say he is coming, then?' interrupted Mrs. Crewe eagerly.

'No, no—not at all! Listen to this:

' "MY DEAR MISS PIERS,

" "My friend—the connoisseur of whom I spoke to you—has, I am happy to say, taken two of your pictures, the copy of a head from the Dresden Gallery, and the 'On the Elbe,' for which he has given twenty pounds. And if you will allow me to keep the view near some fortress—I forget the name—I beg your acceptance of four guineas for it. I therefore enclose a cheque for twenty-four pounds four shillings, and congratulate you sincerely on your success. I think it not improbable my friend may like to have some other productions of your brush. I am not at

all aware what price your work would be likely to command among regular dealers, and Mr. Trent thinks it would be well if you could ascertain this, with a view to fixing your own prices. Perhaps my daughter's drawing-master might be able to assist you; I should be happy to give you an introduction to him if you wish it: he does not live far from you. Of course, the present little transaction is exceptional.—With compliments to Mrs. Crewe, I am, dear Miss Piers,

“Very truly yours,

“KATE TRENT.”

‘And there—there is the cheque,’ cried Laura excitedly, holding up a long slip of pale lavender paper. ‘I can scarcely believe it! Isn’t she kind—is it not marvellous?’

‘Twenty-four pounds four,’ repeated Mrs. Crewe in doubtful tones. ‘Well, it is a nice little sum, but nothing very generous. I suppose this connoisseur she talks about is rich—and my opinion is that he has got a bargain! Let me look at the note, my dear: I *did* think it was from Mr. Piers, by the fuss you made!’

‘Well, Mrs. Crewe, so I ought! I mean, I ought to make more fuss about it than about one from Reginald—fond as I am of him. This may be the beginning of independence.’

‘I declare, Laura—for a sweet girl, which you are, you can be rather provoking: but I will say no more now. Look here, my love—I call the end of this note nasty—decidedly nasty! Does she mean that you have got too much for your beautiful pictures—or what does she mean by calling it an *exceptional* transaction? I am sure when I went to see the Royal Academy with Miss Brown, I saw nothing better than your pictures.’

‘Then I am very sorry for English art,’ returned Laura, laughing. ‘I am sure Miss Brown would not agree with you.’

‘Oh! I am quite aware I am ignorant on many subjects, art included.’

‘You are too good to those you like,’ said Laura apologetically. ‘But what shall I do with this money? I want to make some very good use of it.’

'Buy yourself a new dress and hat, and put what is left away in the Post-office savings-bank. You may want it, or you may not,' nodding her head sagely. 'We shall see what we shall see!'

Laura made no answer. She had for some time resolutely refused to notice, or reply to, any of Mrs. Crewe's insinuations or suggestions, hoping they might cease for want of opposition. She sat silently gazing at the slip of paper which she held, and which she felt ought to be a talisman to her and strengthen her in the daily conflict.

'I must write to the Admiral and Winnie,' she exclaimed, at last rousing from her thoughts. 'Perhaps we may both be with you, dear Mrs. Crewe. Suppose I could sell six or seven pictures in a year at ten pounds apiece, with my own little money and some drawing lessons I could do quite well; and they might lead to pupils for Winnie—you do not know how clever she is in music and languages.'

'I do not doubt it, my dear; but teaching and all that sort of thing is miserable work. Winnie Fielden is so handsome that if she could just be dressed up and set out in society she would marry well; mark my words.'

'I daresay she would, for she is a dear! and so bright and pleasant! But though it must be very delightful to have a nice, kind husband, don't you think it is better and more honest to try and get one's own living than to buy fine clothes on the chance of making a good marriage?'

'Yes, yes, I know. That is all very fine, no doubt, just like the sentences they put in copy-books; but no one cares to act upon them. It is how can you get on best and fastest, people think about; but as for women, they have so few ways of getting on.'

'But, Mrs. Crewe, you have always been honest and self-sustaining, and you have got on.'

'After a fashion. Ah! dear Laura, I wish every girl a better lot than I had. There! there is no use talking.'

The morning after the receipt of Mrs. Trent's note, Mrs. Crewe, having had an early dinner, started to make some important purchases at Shoolbred's, and Laura rejoiced in a long afternoon all to herself. She had spent the morning in adding touches to her now finished picture

of the Cheddington Glade. It was a labour of love, and it was with reluctance she removed it from the easel lest further efforts to improve it might have the opposite effect. She had sought among her sketches for another subject, and fixed upon a view of Meissen—the old cradle of the House of Wettine. It was a water-colour drawing, and therefore a better basis for a picture ; but she feared the subject was difficult. While she looked and thought, she was dimly conscious that the door-bell had rung loudly, and that Collins had clattered upstairs in obedience to its summons.

Suddenly the door of her little studio opened, and Reginald stood before her. She was too startled for an instant even to be delighted, and felt that she grew pale.

'Why, Laura, you look as if you had seen a ghost !' he cried, coming quickly to her and taking her hand in both of his. 'I have frightened you ? Are you not glad to see me ?'

'Yes, I am indeed ! and I have good news for you.'

'Well, you do not look as if you had been having a good time, as the Americans say. Dear Laura, have you been well ?' still holding her hand.

'Quite well—quite comfortable—and——'

'All the better for not being troubled by my visits, eh ?' he interrupted.

'Yes, of course,' returned Laura, smiling in spite of herself ; 'but sit down, if you can find a chair.'

'I don't want to sit down. I want you to put on your hat and come out with me. It is a heavenly day, and I have a trap and pair of horses I have been trying, at the door.'

'That will be delightful !' cried Laura frankly, 'but let me tell you of my good fortune,' and she proceeded to recount her success in selling her pictures. Reginald listened with an expression half pleased, half amused.

'Well done, Laura ! we will see your pictures on the line one of these days—but go, like a good girl, put on your things, and let us be off.'

Laura gladly ran upstairs, attired herself quickly, yet with unusual care, and descended looking a new creature.

'Good ! you do not spend too much time on your toilette !' cried Reginald, who was putting on his gloves at the open door as she came down. 'You are always the

'right thing,' he added turning to look at her; 'how do you manage it, Laura?'

'That is a compliment,' she replied, smiling. 'I am afraid I must not accept it. I used to be all wrong occasionally in old times!'

'Perhaps so, but not now. Come along! Tell Mrs. Crewe,' he went on, addressing Collins, who was at the door, 'that I will bring Miss Piers home all right some time this evening.'

'Is it not a neat turn out?' asked Reginald, as they walked down the little garden. Laura expressed her admiration.

It was a mail phaeton, dark blue picked out with a lighter shade, drawn by a fine pair of brown bays; a smart groom in snowy buckskins and a leather belt stood at their heads.

'You are my first fare,' said the owner, smiling as he handed her in. 'And I have made up my mind to put the charge at a high figure.'

'You may do that if you like; it is of no consequence to me, seeing I cannot pay.'

'I am not so sure of that,' replied Reginald, as he took his seat beside her and gathered the reins in his hand. 'Where to, Laura?' asked her charioteer; 'shall we go to the Park, or get away from town?'

'Yes—by all means—away from the town; do you mind going to Hampstead? I am so fond of the view from the Heath.'

'You have never seen Richmond, I think? you will like it better than Hampstead; we can put up the horses and take a stroll in the park.'

'It will be perfectly delightful, Reginald! What a good boy you are to give me such a treat!'

'Boy, indeed!' he returned, laughing. 'Pray remember I am five or six years your senior, to say nothing of being ages older in experience.'

'Yet I have had my experience too,' said Laura. 'I feel quite old from having had the care of my uncle and Winnie for nearly four years. By the by, Reginald, I had a dreadful letter from Winnie a few days ago,' and she proceeded to detail its contents, including a full description

of a vulgar nephew of Mr. Morgan who was paying Winnie much unwelcome attention. Reginald listened not too attentively, being a good deal occupied with the eccentricities of one of his horses; at the conclusion Laura exclaimed, ‘Is it not all very disagreeable?’

‘Very! But if this fellow is not too bad style, and has lots of money, why can't Winnie make up her mind to marry him. It is such awful hard lines for a woman to be poor!’

‘But, Reginald,’ cried Laura, pained and wounded by his words—‘don't you see how horrible and shocking it would be to marry such a man as she describes! Better for her to work all her life for bare necessities than—Oh! if you could see Winnie! Do you remember her?’

‘Yes, of course; and I suppose this is an atrocious cad. Do you think me a brute for suggesting such a termination of her troubles?’

‘Such a beginning of them, you mean! No—you were not thinking of what you said.’

‘That is the truth, I am afraid. Never mind, Laura; I am going to pay the Admiral a visit in a day or two, and I will do my best to induce him to restore Winnie to you! I don't like to see that fretted look in your eyes when you speak of her; do you know that you have very expressive eyes, Laura? Did any one ever tell you so?’

‘No, indeed,’ returned Laura, laughing. ‘I don't think any one ever looked twice at them except Winnie, and that only when she wanted to see if I were vexed with her or not.’

‘Ay! they speak truth—they are eyes one can trust, as you trust Heaven,’ cried Reginald, turning to look at her earnestly; ‘and that is more than can be said of most eyes, however beautiful they may be!’

He drove on for some time in silence, apparently lost in thought. At last the pause became oppressive, and Laura broke it to inquire for Mrs. Piers and Lady Jervois; after which the conversation, though intermittent, flowed with tolerable ease on ordinary topics, Reginald pointing out anything that was worth notice as they drove by Mortlake and Sheen, and so into the remoter side of the park.

On reaching a beautiful point of view over the river, Reginald proposed to alight.

'It is deliciously cool and shady here,' he said. 'Let us stroll about for a while and walk back to the Star and Garter—while you —to the groom—can drive there at once, and put up the horses.'

The man touched his hat, and when Laura had descended drove slowly away.

'Come, this is like old times, to be once more alone together under the greenwood tree. You would like Pierslynn; I saw more of it during this last visit. It is really a nice old place—my mother is charmed with it and all its belongings. I think you would like Pierslynn,' repeated Reginald, more to himself than to his companion; 'and you could help me to make it a charming home.'

'I could!' exclaimed Laura, greatly wondering. 'Oh, of course I should be ever so happy to help you in any way, but it would be the lion and the mouse over again.'

'Laura,' said Reginald, turning to her with his sweet, pleasant smile, and taking her hand, 'is it possible you don't yet understand my hopes and wishes?'

'How—what hopes?' she returned in a low voice, while a strange tremor ran through her frame.

'Don't you know, dearest old friend, that I have always loved you? that this sudden change in my fortunes would be valueless to me if you will not consent to share them! Will you be my wife, Laura?'

She could not reply; for a moment astonishment overpowered every other feeling.

'You love me, Reginald! you wish me to be your wife!' she said at last brokenly. 'I do not seem able to believe it.'

'Why not?' exclaimed Reginald eagerly. 'We were always dear friends: what more natural than becoming lovers now? You always had a charm for me! and, Laura—I think I have always been—well, a favoured cousin?'

Laura was silent—too bewildered to think or speak distinctly.

'Believe me,' resumed Reginald earnestly after a moment's pause, during which he looked at her anxiously—'Believe me, almost my first thought on succeeding to Pierslynn was to try and win you! and I repeat that

everything will be valueless to me if I cannot succeed. Answer, Laura! Don't, for God's sake, tell me you are entangled with any one in Germany !'

He spoke in a tone of sharp apprehension so unmistakably real that Laura was deeply moved.

'Ah! Reginald,' she said almost in a whisper, 'I have always loved you as a brother—you seemed so like one; even now I cannot help fearing that you mistake your own feelings. Oh! do look well into your heart, lest you make a mistake that might destroy us both! Now I can be happy in your friendship, your quiet regard; but if in truth you wish for more—if you really want me to be your wife—Ah, Reginald! I could love you well! too well!'

She covered her face with her hands, turning slightly from him, while her throat swelled with quick sobs, for her habitual self-control was not equal to so great a strain. A look of relief relaxed Reginald's countenance as he gently strove to remove her hands.

'Dearest,' he exclaimed, when he had possessed himself of one, 'trust me! I understand what I want and wish perfectly well! I want your love and companionship all my life. I know I shall have in you the best of wives, the truest of friends. When I first met you after you came back from Germany, I resolved to ask you to be mine, and I have delayed doing so only because I feared you might think me too precipitate! Now give me your promise—your solemn promise—to be my wife, and that soon, in spite of any difficulties which may arise. I can never settle to my new life, I can never feel secure, until I have you by my side.'

He kissed the hand he held as he spoke.

'You promise me, dear Laura?'

'If indeed I am necessary to you,' returned Laura, the strange delicious certainty that she was truly loved and warmly sought creeping through her veins like some divine and potent elixir. 'I will be your true wife—but oh! Reginald, the difficulties will be great! I foresee your mother's disappointment—how could it be otherwise! I am frightened to think of her opposition.'

'You must not be,' he returned firmly. 'I have always done my best for my mother, but in the choice of a wife I

have a right to please myself, *and I will*. When she knows you, my mother will learn to value you ; and after a decent time given to persuasion, I am determined to do as I choose in this most important act of my life.'

'Ah ! you expect a formidable resistance, I see,' cried Laura, pressing the hand that held hers nervously—'is it wise to call it forth ?'

'That question is settled,' he returned ; 'I have your promise, and I will hold you to it ; in fact, the sooner we are married the sooner every one will come round to Mrs. Piers of Pierslynn, and find her the most charming, *spirituelle*, artistic lady of the manor imaginable.'

He slid his arm round her as he spoke and drew her to him, while he laughed a happy boyish laugh that completed the measure of Laura's content.

How unspeakably sweet, how intoxicating it all was ! The shadows lengthened as they conversed—and so long as she lived Laura never forgot the outlook on which she gazed : the rich woods, the fair flowing river winding below the hill whereon they sat, the perfume of some pine-trees near them, the wealth of many-tinted leafage, mingling with the short sweet grass, the thin golden haze hanging over the dim distance, while the soft 'coo, coo' of the wood-pigeon, that most loving of all inarticulate sounds, came from the recesses of the wood. Never did she hear it again without hearing too the echo of Reginald's voice as he painted their future in glowing hues to his happy listener.

'But, Reginald, it must be dreadfully late !' exclaimed Laura at last, struck by the changing light. 'Do see what o'clock it is !'

'Oh, never mind ; Mrs. Crewe will forgive us our sins—but, by Jove ! it is half-past six. I believe we had better be going, and you are looking pale and done-up. Ah, Laura, I intend to take good care of you. Now, before we return to the haunts of men, give me a kiss, to seal our compact—for, remember, it is a very serious one.'

Laura silently complied. To her it was a solemn, sacred rite—a betrothal as binding as a marriage—and she grew pale instead of blushing when her lips first met her cousin's.

'Laura,' said Reginald, as they approached Leamington Road, 'I think we had better tell Mrs. Crewe at once.'

'Oh no, not just yet!' exclaimed Laura, shrinking from the vision evoked by his words. 'She cannot keep silence.'

'Well, in this case she need not. I do not want to make a secret of our engagement, Laura. Do you? Why should it not be made known at once? I intend going down to see the Admiral to-morrow, and on my return, darling, let us arrange some day early next month for the marriage; we shall then have time enough for a peep at the North of Italy before we settle down at Pierslynn, at home for the winter. Eh, Laura, does it not sound oddly familiar, being at home together?'

'Reginald, it seems still impossible that such things can be; and, remember, nothing can be settled until your mother is brought round.'

'Nonsense, Laura! *I* ought to be your first consideration, and, *you* must remember that you have solemnly promised to be my wife, irrespective of any one's consent or approbation.'

'Well—we must be guided by what the Admiral says.'

'To a certain extent—yes,' returned Reginald. 'At any rate, it is quite necessary Mrs. Crewe should be duly informed. Heavens, how she will hold forth!'

A few minutes more brought them to the door. It was opened directly by Collins, grinning more broadly than ever; while farther back Mrs. Crewe might be descried, attired in her favourite grenadine, her face wreathed in smiles, nodding and waving her head gracefully to her 'young friends.'

'I really believed you had eloped!' she exclaimed, as she advanced to meet them; 'pray, have you any idea what o'clock it is? Never mind! young people will be young people. Come, your tea is quite ready—a beautiful pigeon-pie and some peaches—make haste and get off your hat, Laura.'

'Sorry I cannot stay. Mrs. Crewe, may I speak to you for a moment?'

While Laura ran hastily upstairs out of the way, Reginald followed Mrs. Crewe into the drawing-room,

and soon explained how matters stood to his delighted auditor.

Meantime Laura hastily locked her door, threw herself on her knees beside her bed, and strove to think clearly of the mighty, glorious change the last few hours had wrought in her destiny.

To be Reginald's especial choice! to have always been loved by him so truly that his new-found fortune was valueless if not shared by her! It was incredible—incomprehensible; pray God he did not deceive himself, for somehow, though so true and affectionate, he still seemed more a brother than a lover.

But the consciousness of being loved by Reginald clothed her with beauty and strength and wisdom in her own eyes, and gave her power and capacity, by bestowing the self-confidence she had hitherto needed. She would help him to guide his life worthily, even while she ruled herself by his will and knowledge. Reginald, her bright, brave, clever kinsman, loved her, and all things had become possible. What would the Admiral say? And Winnie! how delighted she would be! and surely Reginald and herself, between them, would work deliverance for Winnie—even—

Here a sharp knock at the door, accompanied by the words, ‘You must let *me* in, my dear,’ interrupted her and announced Mrs. Crewe. Laura hastily dried the tears of which she was till that moment unconscious, and turned the key.

‘Ah, my dearest Laura!’ exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, entering with a radiant face. ‘Didn’t I always tell you so? Confess that my experience guided me unerringly. I congratulate you from the depths of my heart!’ and she folded her in a huge embrace. ‘Nothing has given me greater pleasure for many a year. You *are* a lucky girl, Laura! A more charming, delightful, agreeable, handsome young man never existed; and so desperately in love, dear; quite a romance, I declare! We’ll have the wedding here, of course. By removing the sideboard and bureau, and using a horseshoe table, we can accommodate thirty people quite well at the breakfast, and—’

‘Dear Mrs. Crewe, you are indeed going far ahead,’

cried Laura. ‘There is much to be done and arranged first.’

‘My dear child! delays are dangerous,’ returned Mrs. Crewe significantly. ‘Don’t you oppose your cousin’s wish to be married immediately—it is very natural and quite right; but come down, he is just waiting to bid you good-bye. Dear me, how pale you look! And I declare you have been crying! Here’—rapidly pouring out some water into the basin—‘bathe your eyes, do, dear!—I am sure it must be tears of joy you have shed!—and then brush over your hair a little. I will go down and say you are coming: God bless you, my dear child! you have my warmest good wishes.’ And having bestowed a second hug on her young friend, she left the room.

How strange yet delicious was the feeling of shy hesitation which made Laura pause with her hand on the dining-room door before she opened it, and met Reginald face to face, transformed from a relative into a *fiancé*.

‘Ah, Laura!’ he exclaimed, rising to meet her, ‘forgive me for teasing you to come down: but I did not like to leave without seeing you, and I have twenty things to do this evening.’

‘I will wish you good-bye, then, as I must speak to Collins,’ said Mrs. Crewe.

‘I intend going down to see the Admiral to-morrow,’ said Reginald somewhat abruptly as she left the room; ‘and though it is not much more than two hours’ journey the return train is a late one, and I do not think I can manage to see you till the day after. I suppose the good old man will have no objection to me?’

‘I imagine you are a favourite with him already,’ returned Laura, glancing shyly but brightly up at him. ‘And I am sure he will be pleased to hear——’ she stopped.

‘That we are going to take each other for better for worse? Well, I think so too; I shall also write to my mother to-night.’

‘Yes, Reginald,’ she said, with an unconscious shiver. ‘I dread her reply.’

‘Nonsense!’ he replied, taking her hand in both his. ‘We have only to be steady to our own intentions and to

each other to conquer all opposition. Good-night, dearest ; do not fret or worry about anything ; we are going to be the happiest couple to be found anywhere. So good-night.'

He drew her to him, kissed her warmly, and was gone.

CHAPTER XII.

THE morning after this auspicious day brought the following letter to Laura :

'MY OWN DEAR,

'I told you how worried and annoyed I have been of late, and yesterday put a climax to it all.

'That horrid little wretch Jack must have been telling my aunt some stories more or less false about our meeting Mr. Price out walking, for she asked me to come up to her room before dinner, and made a long speech about the impropriety of trying to attract her husband's nephew, because a marriage with me would be so very disadvantageous to him and displeasing to his people (who are, I believe, small farmers in Caernarvonshire). Well, you may fancy how I answered ; indeed, the whole thing was so ridiculous that I could not help laughing, which seemed to surprise her. Then she said that both Mr. Morgan and herself were anxious to help me on ; so, if I would undertake to be very circumspect in my conduct, I might remain with them as governess at £20 a year ! provided always that I accepted the position and kept with my pupils.

'Darling Laura, I could have jumped for joy as she spoke, because I know the dear Admiral will see the abominable injustice of her proposal—and this will deliver me out of their hands !

'So I knew I looked quite pleasant as I replied that I must ask Admiral Desbarres before I made any decision. "By all means," she said ; "and you will see how glad he will be to get rid of you." I do not believe *that* ! At any rate, I wrote to him last night. Now, Laura, I think

it would be a great help if Mrs. Crewe would put in an advertisement for me in some paper for a daily engagement—German, and French, and music, and all that—so as to have things in train when the Admiral gives his consent. Oh! if you can sell your pictures, and I can find pupils, we shall get on splendidly!'

'She is right,' thought Laura, as she finished reading this letter; 'the Admiral will never consent to such a proposition; but I must wait to see Reginald before I reply. I will send a few lines to cheer her up, and say I hope to send her good news to-morrow. Ah! what wonderful news!'

So Laura opened her little writing-case, set out pen, ink, and paper, and forthwith fell into a delicious reverie. Indeed, her whole day passed in this way: an attempt at her usual occupations, a lapse into rainbow-hued day-dreams, a struggle to shake them off, to be up and doing, and then another excursion into cloudland. Meanwhile Mrs. Crewe pervaded the house with triumphant activity, having instituted a searching and complete cleaning of the dining and drawing-rooms in anticipation of a visit from Reginald, in the character of an accepted lover, on the following day.

A loud imperative ring of the front-door bell disturbed her during one of these visits. 'Who can that be? It is too early for visitors. How annoying!—and I have not changed my dress! Who is it, Collins?' as that functionary entered with a smutty face and a dirty apron, but a look of some excitement.

'Mr. Holden, I'm, as would like to speak to you if convenient.'

'Mr. Holden!' in a scream of surprise. 'Well, wonders will never cease! I trust and hope he is going to pay me my money at last.'

In the entrance the chairs and tables from the drawing-room were piled up, and in the midst of the chaos stood the ex-clerk of Messrs. Thurston and Trent, looking more complacent and self-satisfied than ever.

'Good-morning, Mr. Holden; this is quite an unexpected pleasure,' said Mrs. Crewe, with stately civility.

'Happy to see you, ma'am. I suppose you had given me up as a bad job,' he returned facetiously.

'I had indeed ceased to anticipate a visit from you,' she rejoined; 'pray walk in. You find me rather in confusion; but never mind.' And she opened the dining-room door, discovering that apartment advanced to the stage of having the furniture restored, but not yet put in order.

'Well Mrs. Crewe, I must compliment you on your looks. By George! you are as blooming as the flowers in May! The world has been going well with you, to judge by appearances.'

'The world is as hard as ever, Mr. Holden, though, thank God, I have not suffered so much as I *might* have done through irregularities—and—but I will not dwell upon the subject.'

'Come now, don't be down upon a fellow! I know you have just cause of complaint. I know I have not behaved well, but the fact is I got into a mess, and now I have got out of it; so my business here is to make all square, and pay up like a gentleman. I think you have a bit of paper of mine?'

'Yes, Mr. Holden,' emphatically, 'I had *so* much faith in you that I have not yet thrown it into the waste-paper basket.'

Mrs. Crewe rose, and, going to the table, extricated the little writing-desk with the broken hinge from under some cushions, a card-plate, and the freshly shaken and folded table-cover. 'Here,' she continued, 'is your I.O.U.—fifteen pounds ten shillings and sevenpence.'

'Fifteen ten, is it? I thought it was only fifteen?'

'Look for yourself, sir,' returned Mrs. Crewe, with dignity.

'Oh, never mind! it's all right, and that's all right,' slapping down a ten-pound note, five sovereigns, and the rest in silver, rather noisily on the corner of the table. 'There's fifteen eleven; trouble you for fippence. Now, ma'am, we are quits, ain't we?'

'We are, Mr. Holden,' she returned. 'And I always *did* think you intended to pay me one day; I think your heart was right, but difficulties, and circumstances over which you probably had no control, prevented that punctuality more congenial to your better nature.'

'You have just hit it, Mrs. Crewe,' replied Holden. 'Now tell me how you have been getting on, and what you have been doing ;' and, with his usual ease, Holden settled himself down for a gossip, his bold beady black eyes twinkling with an expression of curiosity and exultation.

'First let me offer you a glass of wine,' said Mrs. Crewe, her hospitable instincts strongly roused by the agreeable nature of the visit. 'It is quite a journey from the City out here ;' and, making a place on the crowded table, she produced a bottle of sherry and a seed-cake of her own composition. 'And so you have left Thurston and Trent, I hear ?'

'Who told you ? Young Piers ? I thought so ! Yes, I have cut the shop. It was so deuced slow, nothing to be done there ; and such a set of psalm-singing cads, I couldn't put up with them any longer. I have come into a little money, and I am going to join a cousin of mine out in Australia. - He is a horse-dealer on a large scale, and it is a sort of trade that will suit me a deuced deal better than quill-driving.'

'No doubt,' returned Mrs. Crewe, with some emphasis ; 'and so you have come into some money ? I am truly glad to hear it. Pray, was it by bequest or inheritance ? —you will excuse my asking, but I am really interested.'

'Much obliged to you. No, I have not lost any relation lately. Oh ! it is only a trifle that's come to me through my mother.'

'Now, do take care of it, Mr. Holden ! Invest it prudently, and don't squander it on folly.'

'Thanks for your good opinion,' said Holden, with a slightly insolent laugh. 'And now tell me about Denzil ? Where is he cruising about ?'

'My son, Mr. Denzil Crewe, is, I hope, on his way home. He has been last at Algoa Bay.'

'That's all right. And is old what's-his-name upstairs still ?'

'If you mean Mr. Jenkins,' with some stateliness, 'he still occupies my first floor, and is a pattern of punctuality in every respect ! But you don't seem to know that Admiral Desbarres has placed his ward Miss Piers under my care, and also Miss Fielden, her cousin, who is just

now on a visit to her aunt. You know, of course, who Admiral Desbarres is ?'

'I should think I did,' said Holden, rather irreverently. 'So the ward is with you ? It's rather a good thing, I suppose ?'

'Most agreeable and satisfactory.'

'Then I suppose you see my old office-mate, Reginald Piers, sometimes ? He is somehow related to the Admiral's ward, isn't he ?'

'Very closely connected,' said Mrs. Crewe, with a superior smile.

'Ah, indeed !' returned Holden. 'Well, he is a deuced stuck-up fellow—always was—even when he hadn't a rap in his pocket ; and now there's no holding him. I am told Trent counts on him for a son-in-law,' looking keenly at her. 'His daughter is about nineteen, and swell enough, I believe, even for Piers of Pierslynn.'

'There is not a word of truth in the report. Don't you believe it, Mr. Holden,' said Mrs. Crewe loftily.

'Oh ! that's all very fine. But you don't mean to say Piers makes a confidante of *you* ?' asked Holden, with a sneer.

'He might do worse,' returned Mrs. Crewe, driven to the end of her endurance. 'But I am not going to talk of his affairs to you, even to show you you are wrong.'

'I understand,' cried Holden, with an insulting laugh. 'It's a sort of secret not difficult to keep—a mare's nest, in short.'

'I must say, Mr. Holden, you are neither well-bred nor polite,' said Mrs. Crewe, irritated beyond her prudence. 'So, as there is really no necessity for secrecy, I do not mind telling you that Mr. Piers is engaged to my charming young friend Miss Laura Piers, and the wedding is to take place *here* in about six weeks—there now !'

Holden gave a long loud whistle, while an indefinable change passed over his countenance.

'Oh ! that's it, is it ?' he said. 'Well, Mrs. Crewe, you have the pull of me, I admit ! But it seems sharp work. However, I suppose it's a case of boy-and-girl attachment—extra constancy, devotion, and disinterestedness. I presume the young lady is a beauty ? I say,

Mrs. Crewe, could you manage to let a fellow have a peep at the young lady? I'd give a good deal to see her!

'I do not think I can ask her to come down. She is writing letters—business letters of importance—in her own room, and ought not to be disturbed. She——'

What Mrs. Crewe was about to add was never known, for at that moment the door opened to admit the young lady in question, in her walking-dress and with a letter in her hand.

Laura, having written a short reply to Winnie, and knowing that Collins was in the throes of an extensive cleaning, put on her hat to go to the post herself. Absorbed in her own thoughts, she forgot Mrs. Crewe's visitor, or vaguely supposed he must have left, so came into the dining-room to ask Mrs. Crewe if she had any commission to be executed.

Laura stood still and Holden stood up, while Mrs. Crewe, rather annoyed at the unexpected meeting, pronounced a hasty introduction.

'I'm sure, Miss Piers, I consider myself very fortunate to have the honour of making your acquaintance,' said Holden, with elaborate politeness. 'I have often heard your cousin, Mr. Reginald Piers, talk of you; we were great allies, you know, at Thurston and Trent's, so I don't feel as if you were a stranger.'

'Indeed!' returned Laura, looking straight at him with some surprise.

'Yes,' continued Holden, 'he was always a steadier fellow than myself; still, we were pretty well out at elbows when luck turned up for us both—an odd sort of coincidence.'

'Very odd!' returned Laura, seeing that he paused for a reply.

'Fine place Pierslynn,' resumed Holden. 'Have you been there?'

'Never,' said Laura.

'Have *you*?' asked Mrs. Crewe aggressively.

'Yes,' said Holden; 'I was down in that part of the world last week, taking a look at my own native place, which is a couple of hours farther on, over the Welsh border, and I stopped to say "How d'ye do?" to my old

pal. It's a deuced fine place, and a nice old house—regular English—not grand, but comfortable, and well-kept and fit for a gentleman. I don't think Piers was particularly glad to see me,' with a harsh laugh. 'But I say, Madame Piers won't like to make way when Master Reggie gives Pierslynn a mistress? Don't you think so, ma'am?' to Mrs. Crewe.

'No doubt she will rejoice to see her son happy,' said that lady, feeling very uncomfortable.

'And happy he will be if there's truth in the report I hear and the appearances I see,' returned Holden, with terrible significance.

Laura looked at him much puzzled, the colour rising in her cheek.

'You'll excuse me,' he said in answer to the look, with his head a little to one side, and a curious, half-mocking, half-inquisitive expression in his face. 'But I hope Mrs. Piers is not your aunt, or I would not have spoken so free.'

'No; she is not my aunt,' said Laura softly, still puzzled.

'No? Then may I ask the degree of relationship?' said Holden.

'I cannot say—I never knew,' returned Laura. 'Our relationship is distant, I imagine. It was the accident of early association that made us friends.'

'And something more,' said Holden, rising to take leave with a coarse laugh. 'Well, good-bye, Mrs. Crewe: we are quits now, and we are not likely to meet again; but I can tell you, I never was so comfortable as in your house, and I consider you no end of a trump, if you'll forgive the expression. Good-bye, Miss Piers, and permit me to offer my sincere congratulations on your approaching union with Mr. Piers of Pierslynn. Pray tell that gentleman I had the honour of being presented to you, and I think he is the luckiest dog going! My best wishes for your long life and happiness.'

So saying, he picked up his hat, made an abrupt bow, and left the room. Then Laura exclaimed reproachfully:

'Oh, Mrs. Crewe! how could you tell everything to that dreadful, vulgar, common man!'

'My dear child! I never was so vexed with myself! but he dragged it out of me. You know the almost dia-

bolical skill of these legal people, and I defy any one to have resisted his cross-examination.'

'I don't like to say much about it, Mrs. Crewe, but I am awfully vexed that you should have spoken of Reginald and myself to such a man.'

'Do, dear, forgive me! though I am quite sure in a few days your approaching marriage will be openly announced, and then it is no matter who knows. You have brought me luck—Here! look at these crisp notes, and the gold, such nice, new-looking gold! That dreadful low-bred creature has paid me after all, and now I will put on my bonnet and go out with you. There's a pretty square of carpet at Johnson's in the Edgware Road, that I have been dying to buy for this month past for your room! We will fetch it home in a cab, and I will lay it down to-night.'

CHAPTER XIII.

LAURA'S displeasure was quickly dispelled by the sunshine of Reginald's presence, when he arrived early the day after his visit to the Admiral, bright, debonair, and complaisant, as became a successful wooer.

Laura had so far caught the prevailing epidemic that she rose at an unusually early hour, and decked her little painting-room with flowers, arranging it with a degree of pleasant picturesque confusion suitable to an artistic abode. No longer dared she turn a glance of stoic disregard on such small vanities as lace frills and cambric tuckers; on the contrary, she was careful to put the softest and snowiest tulle round her neck and wrists, and found herself gazing with almost painful anxiety in the glass to see if any amount of brushing could convey to her dull hair the satiny sheen which was the characteristic of Winnie's. She desisted with a slight sigh, resolving to leave herself alone. 'He loves me for something better than my looks,' she thought, 'or he would never have sought me.'

It was a moment of almost painfully nervous pleasure till the first greeting was over.

'Well, Laura,' Reginald began, after they had settled themselves in the drawing-room for a good talk, 'my interview with the Admiral was very satisfactory on the whole. He is coming up to town to-morrow to talk with you, dear. It is evidently a tremendous affair with him! Whereas to you and me, who have known each other for the first half of our lives, it seems quite natural to spend the rest of it together. Eh, Laura?'

'No, Reggie—not yet; to me at least it seems very strange. And the Admiral is coming! Don't think me foolish and weak—but I quite dread the idea of talking to him. What an awful array of responsibilities he will set before me!'

Reginald laughed.

'Let him talk, Laura—why should you mind? I am the principal personage, and you don't think I am going to be a hard taskmaster?'

'What did he say about your mother, Reginald?'

'About my mother? Oh! nothing particular.'

'Of course you spoke of her. Does he think it will be very difficult to get her consent?'

'Oh no. He thinks it is quite right and natural that we should marry. He was good enough, too, to express high approbation of my unworthy self.'

'I knew he always liked you, Reggie. Have you written to your mother?'

'I have. She is frightfully slow about answering letters, so I shan't expect a reply much before the day after to-morrow.'

'Surely she will reply quickly to such a letter as yours!' cried Laura, surprised.

'We will see,' returned Reginald evasively. 'By the way, I did not forget about your cousin Winnie. The Admiral had had a letter from her, and was rather indignant with her aunt. He is going to send for her forthwith, so she will be a nice little bridesmaid for you.'

'And he is really going to send for her? Oh, that is too delightful! What have I done to deserve all this happiness?' and the quick tears of joy sprang to her eyes.

'Dear Laura!' cried Reginald, looking keenly at her. 'You are happy, then, to be my wife?'

It was a day long to be remembered—everything was *couleur de rose*. The afternoon was spent strolling through the galleries of South Kensington, and art never seemed so charming before to Laura. But evening drew in, and Reginald was obliged to leave early, as he had an appointment at eight which he had postponed to give the day to Laura.

'Oh, Reggie,' she exclaimed as he was going, 'I forgot to tell you that an acquaintance of yours was here yesterday—a Mr. Holden.'

'Who?' asked Reginald. 'Holden? What brought him here?'

'He came to pay Mrs. Crewe some money.'

'She should not parade you for all the raff of clerks that have lodged in her house!'

'She did not; I came in accidentally.'

'Well, I don't want you to know such fellows. He was the plague of my life at Trent's office. He does not know his place.'

'Well, Mrs. Crewe says he is going to Australia.'

'He is right to export himself before it is done for him.' Reginald spoke hastily—harshly; then, with a sudden change of tone, he bade Laura an affectionate good-night.

But, despite her sense of happiness, her faith in Reginald's loyalty and love, the morrow which succeeded this blissful day was one of trial to Laura. There is real suffering in the 'fearful looking for of judgment' from one who, however loved and respected, is actuated by motives and ideas somewhat beyond one's ken.

Laura's heart sank within her as she found herself face to face with the Admiral. He was standing beside a small cabinet looking at a photograph of Winnie, and turned to meet her with a kind, grave smile.

'My dear Laura'—taking her hand—'I have been detained, and fear I have caused you some uneasiness.'

'I have been very, very anxious to see you,' said Laura, in a low, unsteady voice.

'Naturally,' said the Admiral, and he led her to a chair, drawing one beside it for himself. 'It is a very solemn

matter I have come to discuss with you, my dear ward,' he began; 'but you have my sincere sympathy, my entire approval. It is a sacred and mysterious relationship that you and your cousin propose to enter into. I hope, I believe, you would not enter lightly upon it. A wife's responsibility is great. God has given a mighty and a glorious task into the hands of the woman, even to be as the hidden leaven—working unseen till the whole existence she shares is leavened.' The Admiral paused with the usual wistful look in his soft, grave, dark eyes. 'The husband has his part,' he resumed; 'and though just now Reginald is in the flush of youth, prosperity, and first affection, there is that in him which will develop into the true Christian man—strong and faithful. His constancy to the love he so early conceived for yourself is in my opinion an evidence of his high character.'

'I am myself amazed at it,' said Laura softly.

'Nay, I am not,' replied the Admiral, with a kind smile; 'I admire and approve his choice. I believe my ward will make a true good wife. But Reginald tells me that he has persuaded you to an almost immediate marriage. I do not think this desirable or possible.'

'He spoke to me of it,' said Laura, blushing vividly. 'But I neither agreed nor refused—I could say nothing till I had seen you!'

'Quite right—quite right,' returned her guardian, with an air of entire approval. 'It is natural that the young man should be anxious to make you his wife—especially as you are an orphan and without a real home; but there is an obstacle. I find it rather an ungracious task to explain.'

'I can save you,' interrupted Laura, her colour receding even quicker than it came, 'His mother, Mrs. Piers, refuses her consent.'

'She does,' said the Admiral. 'Why, how did you know?'

'Because it is only natural that she should,' returned Laura sadly. 'I have little to recommend me as a daughter-in-law to a proud woman. This is a terrible, almost insurmountable obstacle.' She stopped short, her heart beating painfully.

'Serious—but not insurmountable,' said the Admiral soothingly. 'Mrs. Piers, like most loving mothers, estimates her son too highly, but in this love is our best ally; she cannot long refuse her consent to what is important—nay, essential—to her son's happiness.'

'Alas!' replied Laura, 'I fear it will be difficult to remove her objections.'

'I scarcely understand them,' said the Admiral thoughtfully. 'You are a well-educated gentlewoman of his own blood, not too nearly related, well known to him in every particular of your life, in every respect an unusually prudent choice. I only fear it is a somewhat vain ambition which actuates her; but, my dear Laura, I propose to visit her myself, and hope to bring her to reason and common sense.'

'What, you undertake this journey for my sake! for my interest!' cried Laura. 'You are indeed a father to me! But dear, dear Admiral Desbarres, spare me the humiliation of being forced on Reginald's mother! at least, leave the attempt to him. He can do more to reconcile her than any one else. I would not for worlds cause any dissension between them, or enter a family averse to receive me.'

'That sounds finer than it really is,' said the Admiral gravely. 'You have promised to be Reginald's wife—your first duty is to think of his happiness, not your own pride; and though you are both bound by every means to seek his mother's assent to your union, if she is obstinate in her objection, I—I scarce know what to advise. The duty and obedience due to a mother is almost limitless,' he continued in a slow, hesitating manner. 'Yet the obligation on her to promote her son's welfare is equally imperative. I feel it right that I should see Mrs. Piers. I have resolved upon this visit; I shall then go on to Liverpool and bring Winnie back with me.'

'Bring Winnie back!' cried Laura, her face brightening. 'Oh! dearest guardian, how grateful I am to you! It will be so delightful to have dear Winnie back again!'

The Admiral smiled.

'She has been unjustly treated, poor child, and it is my intention from henceforth to take charge of her fortunes. I think I have mentioned that I am, or shall be, a richer

man than I was, so that neither of you dear children need hesitate to accept the help I have pleasure in giving. It is business connected with my money matters that prevents my going to Pierslynn to-morrow, as my young friend Reginald requested me. Tell me, what arrangements can Mrs. Crewe make to receive Winnie ?'

While Laura listened and replied to her guardian a quick firm foot sprang up the front doorsteps, and a loud decisive ring made her heart leap for joy.

The next moment Reginald entered with head erect, a smile on his lips, and an indescribable look of triumphant satisfaction in his eyes. He walked straight up to Laura, and, taking the hand she held out, kissed her cheek with an air of proprietorship that drew a kindly smile from the Admiral.

'Well, Laura,' he said, still holding her hand while he bowed to her guardian, 'has the Admiral told you of my mother's letter ? But I see he has. Come, my darling, you must not let that worry you. My poor mother has the sort of estimate of my value usually formed by widows of their only sons ; with or without her consent, we will be man and wife before six months are over. What do you say, Admiral ?'

'That in all probability you will be man and wife *with* your mother's consent. I want to make some arrangement with Mrs. Crewe about Winnie,' continued the Admiral. 'Will you ask if she would kindly receive me, Laura ?'

Laura rose to seek her, and Reginald, who for all his bright looks seemed restless and ill at ease, followed his fiancée as she left the room.

'You will find me in the studio,' he said. 'I have not inspected your work since I came back. And the Admiral will like a *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Crewe.'

Whether Mrs. Piers gave her consent or not, she could not deprive Laura of the delight of being watched and waited for by her hero, her king, her *rêve de quinze ans* !

So while Mrs. Crewe went to discuss finance with the general benefactor, Laura descended to the painting-room, where Reginald began to exclaim against his mother's unreasonableness, not harshly, and partly in jest, but winding up by a strong appeal to Laura's love and faith not

to allow any one's opinions to separate them ; urging her with vehemence that half frightened her, while she could not quite keep possession of her cool reason before the unexpected force and fire of his arguments and entreaties. He knew his mother, he said ; no amount of persuasion would avail ; nothing but decided action would produce any effect ; once they were married, Mrs. Piers would come round. Would Laura have the courage to be his, in spite of all opposition ? Mrs. Crewe would certainly befriend them. Once the marriage ceremony had been performed no one would attempt to take Laura from him, though she was still under age.

'Reginald, Reginald !' cried Laura, startled into her senses by the wild plan he was suggesting, and withdrawing the hand he had held tightly in both of his, 'what are you thinking of ? You cannot wish to marry in the face of every one's disapprobation, to make a runaway marriage, before trying what reason and persuasion will do ! It is not like you to be so—foolish.'

A cloud gathered on Reginald's brow. 'I thought you had warmer sympathy with me,' he said gloomily.

Before Laura could utter the earnest protest which rose to her lips, Mrs. Crewe was heard calling, 'Laura, my dear Laura !' and then, presenting herself—'The Admiral wants to see you both before he goes.'

'Think of what I have said,' whispered Reginald as they followed Mrs. Crewe, 'and do not let an overstrained idea of propriety make you indifferent to my happiness.'

The Admiral took leave with his usual kindly yet formal politeness. Mrs. Crewe, with impressive observance, accompanied him and Reginald to the door, from which she observed a somewhat dilapidated four-wheeler approaching.

'Who in the world can it be ?' said Mrs. Crewe.

'Please, 'm, Mr. Piers has forgotten his gloves,' cried Collins eagerly.

'Run, then, my girl,' Mrs. Crewe said, turning and standing back to let her pass, so that she missed seeing a gentleman get out of the cab—a man of middle height, but exceedingly broad-shouldered and square, with loose-looking dark clothes and a cloth cap. There was a short stoppage while the departing guest received his gloves ;

then the hansom drove off, and the newcomer, shouldering a large portmanteau, entered the garden.

Mrs. Crewe gave a sudden joyful shriek.

'It is Denzil!' she cried. 'Denzil himself!'

She flew down the steps and endeavoured to embrace him, portmanteau and all.

'My dear, dear boy! my blessed son! Here, Collins, take this great horrid portmanteau. Come in, my dearest son. You must be so tired and hungry. Do give that thing to Collins.'

'No, mother, it is too heavy for the girl; I will put it down indoors. Why, you are looking uncommonly well, mother!—ever so much better than when I left you.'

He quickly ascended the steps, and Laura, not liking to intrude on the joyful meeting of mother and son, ran away to her own room.

CHAPTER XIV.

The light of a glowing July day was changing to evening's hue when Mrs. Crewe tapped at Laura's door; she entered with radiant looks and eyes still moist with tears of joy.

'You must not think I have forgotten you,' she said; 'but my dear boy and I have had so much to talk over. And, God be thanked! I had so much good news to tell. the minutes, and indeed the hours, have flown by. Ah, Laura! we have seen such rough times together, that we have each grown to feel every throb of the other's heart.'

'I am sure it is quite natural you should forget everything except each other,' said Laura kindly. 'Is not his return a great surprise?'

'It is. And now he has come to make some little stay, for the firm will not send him out again except in command; and one of their captains, who is expected home from Calcutta, is going to resign, so Denzil is to wait for his ship. Come down, dear; tea is quite ready, and Denzil is prepared to meet his mother's dear friend in you.'

In the dining-room was the man of whom Laura had

caught a glimpse when he descended from the cab that afternoon : a strong, sailor-like figure, with large dark eyes and a quantity of black curly hair ; a very brown, steady, even stern face, with a square jaw, broad brow, and a mouth concealed by thick moustaches. He was looking towards the door as Laura entered, and holding Toppy on his shoulder after his mother's fashion.

'This is my dear young friend, Laura Piers,' said Mrs. Crewe, laying her hand on Laura's arm, 'and, Laura, let me present my dearest son to you.'

Denzil Crewe made a low bow and put down Toppy, while a frank kindly smile lit up his bronzed countenance, and showed a set of strong white teeth.

'I am very happy to know you,' he said in a deep but not unpleasant voice, 'and thank you heartily for the comfort and companionship you have afforded my mother.'

He came forward as he spoke, and with simple cordiality and a slight but not undignified hesitation held out his hand. Laura readily placed hers in it, expressing her hearty sympathy in the pleasure his return gave to his mother.

And then a very happy party sat down to their evening meal. In Herbert's eyes Denzil Crewe was an object of intense interest ; and, as the new guest bestowed more attention on him than any one else, he gradually warmed up to the pitch of putting a series of questions, nautical, geographical, and commercial, all of which Denzil Crewe answered, clearly, kindly, shortly, without the slightest reference to himself, even resisting his mother's efforts to draw him into personal narrative.

Tea over, Denzil proposed to take a turn in the garden and have a smoke, inviting the delighted Herbert to accompany him.

'I am afraid I have taken your smoking-room, Mr. Crewe,' said Laura. 'Your mother has kindly given me the breakfast parlour to paint in. I imagine you must have had it before.'

'Not at all ; I never smoke in the house. Indeed, I am not often indoors ; do not trouble about that.'

'I am sure, Denzil, you will be charmed with Miss Piers's painting. He has quite a taste that way himself,

Laura. Have you brought home any sketches this time, dear ?'

'Very few—mere scratches ; but I shall like to see your pictures, Miss Piers. I have never known any lady artist—scarce any artists, male or female. "A life on the ocean wave" is not favourable for cultivating the fine arts. Come along'—to Herbert—'let us have a stroll in the garden ;' and Herbert gladly followed him.

'Well, dear,' cried Mrs. Crewe, directly the door was shut, 'what do you think of him ? Ah, if you only knew his goodness and patience and self-denial in the old times ! but he will have his reward. You cannot think how well he stands with the firm ; they have the *highest* opinion of him ; and, between you and me, from what he tells me, I think there is every probability that they will take him into partnership, and then I consider that his fortune will be made, and he need not go to sea again. Oh, how I pray for that day ! Is he like what you expected ?'

'Not exactly ; people never are,' returned Laura, with hearty sympathy. 'But I think he is better-looking than his portrait, and seems very nice and sensible.'

'Sensible ! My dear, he is *immensely* clever ! There is nothing he does not know and understand ; the worst is, he makes so little of himself. Do not mind what he says about his sketches—he draws beautifully, Laura, *beautifully*. Oh, Collins ! Come, my girl ! Come, come, come ! Here, take away the tray ; and then make haste and put your master's room right. He always likes to go to bed early. He must have his breakfast at half-past seven to-morrow, and, indeed, every day ; he has to go down to the docks and to the office, so be sure you have plenty of boiling water at seven or a quarter to ; and, Collins, pray don't forget to set the alarm at *five*, Collins ; and, stop, m I girl, don't you think you might put a nail a little loAnd down and hang the clock just near your ear ? It Ah ! hard to wake you, Collins. There ! Go, go, go.' *hankful*
ollins, are

Meantime events ran on their course. Reginald seems ! according to his promise, and took Laura for pleased and joyful drive to Harrow. He was quieter anerself amongst agreeable than on the day of the Admiral'ser with effusion ;

evidently displeased to hear of Denzil Crewe's arrival, although he congratulated Mrs. Crewe on her son's return.

'What sort of a fellow is this sailor? Is he a gentleman?' he asked, with a frown. 'I never dreamt he would come home.'

'Yes, he is certainly a gentleman,' returned Laura thoughtfully; 'not in a conventional way, but there is something I like very much—something one can trust—in his simplicity and quiet.'

'That's a high eulogium, Laura,' cried Reginald, partly amused, partly offended. 'I begin to feel that this mariner of England is dangerous. I must keep a sharp lookout.'

'Reginald!' she exclaimed, a ring of reproachful surprise in her sweet tones, 'I will not let you talk nonsense, even in jest. Imagine your being jealous of *any one*!'

'Laura,' said he, turning to look long and earnestly into her eyes, 'I believe you are faithful and true, if ever woman was, but I wish the future were nearer. Do you know, that dear old boy the Admiral was not to be put off seeing my mother! He sticks to his own ideas with marvellous tenacity—nails every colour he adopts to the mast, in short.'

'I am very vexed he is so determined on seeing Mrs. Piers,' said Laura, her eyes filling with tears; 'it is humiliating to me.'

'No, do not think so,' returned Reginald soothingly. 'I have been thinking and hoping he may produce some effect on my mother. At any rate, he will have done what is possible by fair means. If that fails, I don't think even the Admiral will be against our taking the law into our own hands. And I have your promise (have I not, dearest?)—your promise to be mine, with or without the maternal consent, when we have exhausted all means of persuasion?'

'Ah, Reginald!' cried Laura, quivering with the effort

of trying the voice and words so dear to her, 'we must wait

Crewe, and see what time will bring forth.'

the breaknsider you *have* promised,' said Reginald, and at

have had ied the conversation, drawing his fiancée into

'Not at alk of the fair future that lay befire them,

am not often inishing touch to her satisfaction by proposing

'I am sure, I'd offer a home to Winnie at Pierslynn.

Piers's painting. er so thoughtful and generous a lover?

The day but one after this conversation the Admiral was expected to arrive with Winnie.

A few hasty enraptured lines from the latter had told Laura to expect them about six. The day seemed unaccountably long. Reginald was particularly engaged, could not by any possibility come out to see Laura, though next day he hoped to make Miss Fielden's acquaintance. Mrs. Crewe had been exceedingly busy arranging a chamber for Winnie ; then that unreasonable old Jenkins had taken offence, partly on account of the copper kettle having been denied to him, and partly because he had received notice to quit.

'Though, believe me,' said Mrs. Crewe, when detailing the particulars of their last interview, 'I expressed myself in the most ladylike manner, with the greatest consideration. He is determined to be off on Wednesday next. I am not sorry he is going. I want all my rooms now that Denzil is here and dear Miss Fielden coming.'

Laura's heart throbbed painfully fast with joy and expectation when, a few minutes after the appointed time, a cab stopped at the door, and the next moment Winnie was in her arms.

What a wonderful delight it is to hear again, after long absence, the voice for which one has longed, to look into the dear familiar face, and read again sympathy and affection in well-known eyes ; to recognise the little gestures, the peculiar turns of expression, so associated with happy days of perfect unrestricted intercourse ! and two months was a long separation for the cousins who had never before been parted even for a day.

Laura was too deeply moved even to speak ; but Winnie rushed into rapid words.

'Oh, dear, dear Laura ! I can hardly believe that I am safe with you again ! It has been so dreadful ! And how well you are looking, dearest ! quite charming. Ah ! Mrs. Crewe, I am so pleased to come back—so thankful you can take me in ! And how is Toppy ? Collins, are you quite well ? How nice and homelike everything seems !'

And everyone crowded round her, feeling pleased and elated by her uncontrolled joy at finding herself amongst them once more. Mrs. Crewe embraced her with effusion ;

Collins curtseyed with a grateful, well-pleased grin ; Toppy purred loudly, and Herbert greeted her with a hearty kiss.

'Let me look at you quietly,' said Laura, when they were safe in the privacy of Winnie's chamber. 'You are not looking like yourself, dearest ; what ails you ?'

In truth, she looked pale and thin. Her deep-blue eyes were bright with the joy of their meeting, but a dark shade beneath them suggested suffering of some kind.

'Yes, I am sure I look old and worn,' returned Winnie, glancing at the glass ; 'but I shall soon be myself again now I am with you. Oh ! I have been quite miserable. Do you know, I don't think my aunt meant to make me unhappy, and Fanny and Jack only followed their natural instinct to trample on or try to trample on, what they thought weaker than themselves. It was Mr. Morgan who hated me, as something he could not conquer ; perhaps he was unconscious of it himself. But oh ! that is all past and gone now ; and you, you dear old thing, are really going to be married to Reggie Piers ! I do not know how it is (I am sure *he* is in the greatest luck to get such a dear good wife !), but somehow I never thought you would marry !'

'Nor did I either,' said Laura, laughing. 'I hardly believe it now.'

'But I do,' cried Winnie ; 'I quite believe it now, you are looking so bright and well and—no, not pretty—better than pretty—as if a soft, bright flame had sparkled up from your heart. And when is it to be ?'

'Not yet a while,' said Laura, with a sigh. 'I will tell you all after dinner ; but pray make haste.'

'Then pray take out my black dinner dress—do you remember Mrs. Crewe's anxiety to get it for me ?—I have only worn it twice.'

'Winnie, did the Admiral mention having seen Mrs. Piers ?' asked Laura anxiously, as she tied a jet locket round her cousin's neck.

'No, not a word. Why ? is there any difficulty there ?'

'Yes, great difficulty, I fear. Mrs. Piers naturally expects her son to make a brilliant match, and——'

'She must be a horrid old cat, then ! and cannot know *you* !' cried Winnie, with much frankness and decision.

A heavy thump on the door startled them. ‘I say, are you two not ready yet?’ said Herbert. ‘Mrs. Crewe says the fish will be quite cold.’

‘We are coming directly,’ said Laura.

‘How much Herbert has grown? He seems to have his wits more about him, too!’ exclaimed Winnie. A last touch to her hair, a last look in the glass, and she declared herself ready.

Mrs. Crewe meantime had awaited the appearance of her two young friends with much impatience. She had on this festive occasion put no small strain on the resources of her modest establishment by resolving—now that her son was at home to take the foot of the table—to give the Admiral a proper seven o’clock dinner. Laura had decorated the table with flowers, and Mrs. Crewe had polished the glasses and folded the napkins after the distinguished style of the butler at her late grandmamma’s.

‘A most wonderful woman my dear grandmamma, Laura. I remember her when I was quite a little girl. She was a daughter of Lord Denzil’s, you know, and always walked with a silver-headed cane. She died at the advanced age of eighty-nine, and had thirty-two teeth in her head the day of her death!’ so explained Mrs. Crewe as Laura assisted to set forth the table.

Mrs. Crewe, the Admiral, Herbert, and Denzil were assembled when the two girls entered, and, after a hasty introduction of her son to Miss Fielden, Mrs. Crewe took the Admiral’s arm and led the way into the dining-room. Mr. Crewe naturally gave his arm to Winnie, and Herbert brought up the rear with Laura.

The little dinner was very successful, and Laura observed that Denzil Crewe was a capital support to his mother, and played the part of host well and easily. He and the Admiral had much to say to each other about shipping and the many changes introduced into the means and appliances of vessels, on the new developments of the carrying trade brought about by the opening of the Suez Canal, etc.; while he by no means neglected the young ladies right and left of him. Winnie, still excited by the joy of being once more free and safe with Laura, talked frankly, with much animation. Laura noticed that Denzil

looked often long and thoughtfully at her when she turned partly from him to speak to his mother or the Admiral, a wistful, half-wondering look, but grave and respectful. Laura herself was silent; she had as yet had no opportunity for speaking with her guardian. She was not, however, eager for the report of his interview with Mrs. Piers.

'Do take a little more claret, Laura dear,' cried Mrs. Crewe. 'I only wish Mr. Piers were here. He is such a charming companion. He was particularly engaged, I am sorry to say.'

'Of necessity he has much to look to on succeeding to his inheritance,' said the Admiral, 'and he has an eager nature—even somewhat impatient, I fear.' He smiled a kindly smile to Laura as he spoke, which called the colour to her cheek.

'Has Mr. Piers reddish-auburn hair and blue eyes?' asked Denzil Crewe, helping himself to a peach. 'I fancy I met him at the Docks this afternoon, coming off a vessel—outward bound for Melbourne I think—' added Denzil.

'You must be mistaken,' cried Laura, much surprised. 'How could you know him, Mr. Crewe?'

'My mother has shown me his photograph—and one of those odd recognitions that seize a man sometimes flashed across me. I feel sure I saw Mr. Piers to-day.'

'I should have thought you too calm and philosophic to entertain such presentiments,' said Winnie, smiling. 'Do you believe, then, in second sight?'

'No; but there *are* strange moods that come upon one, and I am not philosophic, Miss Fielden. Sailors are generally considered superstitious, you know.'

'I do not object to superstition,' said the Admiral thoughtfully. 'Superstition is but an unconscious confession of the need for faith—'

'It is certainly a confession that we are working in the dark, under laws of which we have but a very vague idea,' said Denzil Crewe.

'Still, I cannot believe you saw Reginald,' observed Laura. 'Did you know'—addressing the Admiral—'if he had any business at the Docks?'

'No—I should think he had not, and I imagine Mr. Crewe must be mistaken.'

Soon after they rose from table, and the Admiral, at his own request, went to hold a private conference with Laura in her little studio.

'I have had a long conversation with Mrs. Piers, who is more prejudiced than I anticipated,' began the Admiral gravely; 'more than is justifiable—although she commands my sympathy on one point. Still, I do not despair of her coming round; indeed, as I told Mrs. Piers, you are a daughter-in-law whom any mother might be anxious to secure, although you have none of this world's goods. If you and Reginald have patience, all will come right; and I rejoice to think how true and affectionate a lover you have, my dear Laura! this gift of love is the crowning jewel that God has set as the seal and sign of his delegated Majesty. I once knew something—a foretaste—of its strength and sweetness—but to me it brought a long martyrdom.'

'But, dear guardian, is there not some grave objection which you conceal from me—something you fear would wound me?'

'No,' he returned, and paused long in deep thought. 'No,' he repeated, with a tinge more of cheerfulness. 'Nothing that need cause you uneasiness or self-reproach. Hereafter, when all is well—when you are a happy wife—I will explain my slight hesitation. For the present, be strong and of a good courage—be strong, I mean, against the persuasions with which I feel sure Reginald will tempt you. This impetuosity is perhaps but natural in a young man. I will, however, speak seriously with him myself.'

'I thought Winnie looking very ill and worn,' said the Admiral, breaking a brief silence. 'I must say my heart smote me for having prolonged her trial beyond what was needful. I fear her aunt was neither just nor judicious. I wish I had sooner removed her.'

'Oh, she will soon revive with me—with us,' cried Laura, hastening to reassure him.

'I think I see an improvement already,' he observed. 'Now, my dear Laura, send Herbert to me. I wish to prepare him for going to school after the holidays, and to speak on other topics.'

CHAPTER XV.

THE next day did not bring Reginald Piers, nor the next. Pleasant little notes of excuse came, however, a tempting basket of fruit and flowers, a civil message to Winnie, who expressed her impatience at this delay much more energetically and openly than Laura. Both girls, indeed, were exceedingly busy preparing Herbert's wardrobe, and very delightful it was to both of them to work together once more; while Winnie's lively pictures of life in Liverpool made Laura and Mrs. Crewe merry, as their nimble fingers sped through their self-imposed task.

For it was quite self-imposed, and Mrs. Crewe, who had received most liberal instructions from the Admiral, was by no means satisfied that it was right to permit the future Mrs. Piers of Pierslynn to wear out her eyes mending her cousin's old socks.

Winnie indeed, being of a careless, pleasure-loving nature, was greatly disposed to limit her exertions to the choice of new garments and the giving of orders.

'That dear old angel seems to have loads of money, and wishes to get rid of it; why need we work our fingers to the bone, Laura?'

'Oh! Winnie dear, he is giving Herbert *everything*. We are bound in honour to make his money go as far as possible.'

To which Winnie, vibrating instantly to the touch of truth, replied:

'Yes! of course, of course! What a heedless unprincipled thing I am, not to think all that for myself!'

This conversation took place in the drawing-room, the third afternoon after Winnie Fielden's arrival at Leamington Road. She was more like her old self of the Cheddington days than Laura had seen her since they left Dresden, and she felt her own happiness doubled by the change. If Winnie was thus bright and sympathetic with Reginald, he would be all the more disposed to offer her a home with them, 'a consummation' she devoutly desired.

The afternoon had slipped rapidly away, and Winnie was beginning to think that she had sat a long time at work, when Herbert put his head into the room, and asked her to come out with him.

'She is really a dear, sweet, elegant creature,' said Mrs. Crewe, looking after her. 'I would not blame any man for making a fool of himself about her.'

'No, nor I ; what a charm there is in beauty !' added Laura, with an unconscious sigh.

'Yes, to be sure,' returned Mrs. Crewe quickly ; 'but, after all, it is only skin-deep, and it is well that men are to be found with judgment to choose women of intellect and—excellence—and—'

Mrs. Crewe ran aground in her not very judicious sentence, but Laura did not heed her ; she was thinking how precious beauty had ever been to her, but that *now* she would give ten even of the sunny years which she had every reason to think lay before her could she thereby purchase that most rare gift. To be a beautous woman for her love, a graceful, gracious *châtelaine* of whom he might be proud ; to have some treasure of comeliness, some natural wealth of fair seeming to give in return for all that he had laid at her feet—ah ! what price would be too high to pay for such a possession ? And though she felt so sure of Reginald's loyalty and true affection, a strange chill stole over her heart, weighing it down for a few instants with a shadowy fear, shapeless, undefined !

It was but for a moment : a charm came to break the spell—a peal of the door-bell, followed by the longed-for announcement :

'Mr. Piers is in the drawing-room, 'm !'

Next moment her dread and doubt and self-distrust had all gone, as she stood face to face with Reginald, and heard his voice.

He looked very bright and affectionate, and greeted her with a joyous warmth that made her heart glow.

They talked long of their plans and hopes, and Reginald was more than usually delightful ; he even managed to communicate the unfavourable intelligence that Mrs. Piers had left Pierslynn and was on her way to Vichy, without startling his hearer. 'She will return in her right mind,

dearest, I trust,' he concluded ; 'and the only obstacle to my happiness will be removed ; for, after all, I would rather marry with, than without, her consent.'

'I am so glad you are reasonable, dear Reginald,' cried Laura. 'How long will your mother be away ?'

'Oh, a month or six weeks at the outside. She wanted me to go with her ; but that was not likely—oh, Laura ?'

'If she really wanted you——'

'But she did not ; she only wanted to take me away, as if that would be any avail after the test of nearly four years' separation ! Ah ! Laura my love is like Conrad's,

"Which nought removed nor threatened to remove."

Laura was listening intently, when the door was suddenly opened, and Winnie stood before them—tall, lithe, delicately round, with the graceful poise of head that gives so much dignity to the figure—her ordinary black dress borrowing distinction from the wearer—a large hat with crape band and rosette slightly to one side giving a picturesque Gainsborough look to her head ; the delicate oval face slightly tinged with rose, the somewhat full yet refined red lips parted in a surprised smile, the big dark-blue eyes gazing frankly, earnestly at the pair she had disturbed ; and the masses of her wavy, satiny, nut-brown hair fastened loosely, but not carelessly, back from brow and eyes into a knot, low down upon her neck.

A fairer picture, Laura thought, never presented itself, but she looked on her cousin fearless and unmoved. In the love she had won was no variableness or shadow of turning.

'Ah, Winnie, I am so glad you have come in !' cried Laura.

Reginald rose from his seat and stood an instant in silent surprise ; then springing to meet her : 'Is it possible this is little Winnie ?' he exclaimed, shaking hands with her warmly. 'Why, I should never have known you—you are so tall, so altered, such a young lady.'

'But I told you, Reginald,' said Laura, beckoning her cousin to sit down by her—'you know I told you.'

'Did you ?' returned Reginald, stepping back to let Winnie pass.

'Ah! yes—I daresay you did, Laura; and I daresay Reggie (I suppose I may call him Reggie) never heard you. You have something else to think about. But'—leaning her elbow on the back of Laura's chair—'I should have known you! You are just the same as you used to be at Cheddington,—the same sharp, merry, impatient look, the same conceited air.'

'Conceited!' cried Reginald; 'I am not conceited, am I, Laura?'

'I am not sure; you know your own value.'

'By Jove! I have fallen into the hands of relentless judges—'

'Ah—you are pretty well spoilt, *I suspect*,' said Winnie. 'But what a charming idea of yours and Laura's to marry; you will get on beautifully!'

'Your consent is of the last importance, and we are most grateful for your approbation,' returned Reginald.

Reginald, who was always a pleasant addition to the party, remained to tea, and the second cup had been served when Denzil Crewe came in.

'Very pleased to make your acquaintance,' said Reginald Piers. 'I am quite familiar with your name.'

'You are very good,' was Mr. Crewe's only answer, as he accepted Reginald's offered hand, and the two men stood looking at each other for a moment—looking into each other's eyes with a sudden darkening and dim distrust, as if recognising in that instant contact of spirit a vague but perceptible antagonism; Denzil Crewe standing square, steady, profoundly composed; Reginald alert, gracious, his light eyes keen but courteous, a tinge of condescension in his suavity—not inapt representatives of a battle-axe and a rapier.

Laura watched both with interest, and an odd, uneasy feeling, at which she was herself surprised. Naturally she compared the well-bred grace of her betrothed with the solid, nay, somewhat heavy, strength of Denzil Crewe, to the advantage of the former, yet she felt a sincere liking for her kind hostess's son; there was a strong degree of sympathy between them, and she welcomed him with a pleasant smile.

'I saw the Admiral this morning,' said Denzil, 'as I was coming from Mr. Duncan's, in Gloucester Square.'

'Is it possible?' cried Winnie. 'I thought he had gone away yesterday.'

'It was the Admiral, however,' returned Denzil. 'Admiral Desbarres is not to be mistaken, and I have known him all my life as my patron saint.'

'The Admiral has evidently been amusing himself,' said Reginald, 'and outstaying his leave. I, too, thought our tutelar deity had gone back to his rustic retreat yesterday.'

'The dear, good Admiral!' cried Winnie. 'Do you think, Mr. Crewe, he could ever have smoked and sworn, and drunk grog and chewed tobacco, like other sailors? They all chew tobacco in Marryat's novels, you know.'

'I don't think he ever could. But, Miss Fielden, *all* sailors don't smoke and drink and chew tobacco; though there is still room for improvement,' observed Denzil.

'I assure you there is much that is reprehensible going on in the Royal Navy,' said Mrs. Crewe, shaking her head sagely.

'There is plenty that is reprehensible in every profession,' said Reginald amiably, 'and plenty of good fellows to be found in all.'

'I fancy schoolmasters are the worst lot going,' put in Herbert.

'I remember you used to be very fond of Professor Schroeder,' said Winnie.

'Well, he was a proper sort of a chap, full of life and spirit.'

'Which is remarkable in a German philosopher,' said Laura.

'Did not somebody tell us that he had gone to Africa or Australia with some exploring expedition?' asked Winnie.

'Yes. I did hear something of the sort,' returned Herbert.

'Oh, Reginald!' exclaimed Laura, her memory stimulated by this remark, 'have you any friends about to emigrate? for Mr. Crewe fancied he saw you coming away from a ship in the West India Dock, three or four days ago—the day Winnie came back to us. I do not fancy it could have been you!'

While Laura spoke, a sudden gleam of surprise and displeasure flashed from Reginald's eyes in the direction of Denzil Crewe; it was but instantaneous, and his face immediately settled into somewhat hard composure.

'Yes,' he said, rather slowly, 'I was at the Docks that day; and,' he added, with a smile, 'you may probably see the result of my visit hereafter at Pierslynn.'

'Ah,' cried Herbert, 'I know! Kangaroos, or something queer for the park.'

'Or black swans for the lake. Have you a lake, Reggie?' said Winnie.

'No,' he returned, laughing good-humouredly; 'and if I had, I should be satisfied with the *rara avis* I have already caught!'

At which pleasant conceit every one smiled approvingly, and Laura blushed and shrank into herself; perceiving this, Reginald changed the subject by proposing to give a whitebait dinner at Greenwich to the party there assembled, adding, to Laura's intense surprise, 'I expect my sister, Lady Jervois, in town to-morrow, and she will no doubt postpone her departure for the North to preside.'

'I am sure that is quite charming; only, I thought she wouldn't—that is, I did not know; dear me, it will be very nice!' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, breaking off her sentences rather unconnectedly, and adding, 'If you do not want any more tea, we will leave Herbert to finish his, and go into the drawing-room.'

'Will you not play to us?' asked Denzil of Winnie, opening the piano, 'if it is not unreasonable to ask you every night. I don't suppose you can imagine the enjoyment it is to me to sit in the half-light and listen to you.'

Meantime Reginald followed Laura to the window, where she went to let down the Venetian blind.

'This little room is really sweet and pleasant,' he said, throwing himself into an armchair.

'It is,' said Laura. 'Ah, Reginald, what pleasure wealth enables the owner to bestow! The charm of the room is due to your gift of flowers. You are really very good and generous, Reginald.'

'I am far from good,' he returned softly and slowly,

'but I intend to be desperately good. By the by, Laura, I have something for you here. I forgot the last time I saw you. I was vexed about my mother, and it went out of my head.' He drew from his breast-pocket as he spoke a small leather case, opening which, he took out a brilliant ring of sapphire and diamonds. 'There,' he said, slipping it on her finger—'there—the diamonds for you, the sapphire for my hopes!' And he sighed—a quick sigh, which touched Laura deeply.

'It is very beautiful,' she said, looking down at the ring through her tears. 'Ah, dear Reginald, if your hopes depended on me, none would be unfulfilled.'

'But they do—utterly depend on you.'

CHAPTER XVI.

ALTHOUGH the announcement of an intended call from Lady Jervois had for the moment gratified Laura, she worked herself into a condition of nervous dread before that lady arrived, which she was ashamed to confess, and which Winnie only half perceived. The result was, that she had rarely appeared to such disadvantage as during the visit. She was oppressed with the consciousness that she was the disturbing element in what would otherwise be the sunny tranquillity of good fortune and content, and the anxiety to choose her words with wisdom and prudence paralysed her powers of conversation.

On her side, Lady Jervois was timid, and evidently acting under pressure; while Reginald was a little too perceptibly doing the agreeable.

Mrs. Crewe, with much discretion and self-denial, decided not to appear; nor did Winnie, until Reginald, probably finding the restraint of every one's consciousness intolerable, asked for her; and when she came, she quickly dispersed the dim mist of hesitation and difficulty which had settled down upon the others.

Bright, friendly, fearless, disposed to like Lady Jervois for what she considered her generous espousal of Laura's cause, she chatted away about the weather and the climate

of Germany, the picnics they used to have there, and the nutting excursions Reginald used to share at Cheddington, till Lady Jervois quite cheered up. She was evidently 'taken' with Winnie, and at the end of a comparison between English and German scenery she said, with timid civility :

'I should like to show you some bolder views than you meet in the south, Miss Fielden, when I have the pleasure of seeing you at the Grange.'

'Yes,' added Reginald, 'Ashley Grange is worth a visit; it is within an easy drive of Coniston. We will *all* come and look you up, Helen, one of these days; and now, don't you think we had better be moving?'

Lady Jervois rose with alacrity.

'Good-morning, Miss Fielden,' she said; 'I hope to have the pleasure of meeting you again! I am sorry, Miss Piers, that I am obliged to leave town the day after tomorrow, as Sir Gilbert returns from the Continent to accompany me, otherwise I should be most happy to be of my brother's party to Greenwich. I trust that we shall be very good friends,' she added rather nervously, 'and I hope that my mother will soon recognise how essential you are to my brother's happiness, and withdraw her opposition, which I regret extremely.'

'You are very good; I am greatly grieved to be the cause of any difference——'

Laura stopped abruptly, borne down by an overwhelming sense of humiliation.

'You are very considerate,' murmured Lady Jervois, offering her hand for a chilly touch; and with a sweet but rather conventional smile, her ladyship passed out.

Reginald lingered an instant.

'What the deuce is the matter with you, Laura?' he said in a low quick tone. 'Why were you so cold and stiff with her? You ought to have chatted away like Winnie.'

'Ah, Reginald!' returned Laura in the same tone, 'Winnie has nothing at stake;' but he was gone almost before she had finished speaking.

The ensuing weeks were very happy to Winifrid Fielden. The hearty sympathy with which she rejoiced in Laura's

happy prospects, the consciousness of being a pet with Mrs. Crewe, and perhaps an acknowledged enjoyment of Denzil's partly disguised admiration, which she was far too true a woman not to recognise—all were agreeable ingredients in a pleasant whole. But the brightest jewel of all was the delightful brotherly companionship of Reginald Piers. Scarce a day passed that he was not with them walking in Kensington Gardens, chatting and smoking in the studio, driving the two girls far into the beautiful environs of London, and accompanying them to such galleries and sight-seeing as were available at the close of the season.

Winifrid's nature was essentially pleasure-loving, but in no selfish sense. Perfectly aware that she could charm, she liked to cast her spell on all who came near, from the loving necessity of drawing all to herself. Such was the sunny surface of her disposition in this her springtime; but warmer, stronger qualities slumbered in the unstirred depths of her being.

The prevailing subject of interest about this time to the whole party was a plan of Reginald's to which he attached some importance. Among his miscellaneous belongings were a couple of very tumble-down tenements in the market-town of Midhurst, which was within half an hour's drive of the Pierslynn Park gates. The leases of these houses had just expired, and Reginald proposed to erect on their site a workmen's reading and lecture room, with a library, if the mayor and corporation would aid him in supplying books. These potentates graciously promised to assist, and Reginald set architect and contractor to work, and generally made his appearance in Leamington Road with a roll of plans or a memorandum of estimates. The project necessarily caused numerous visits to Pierslynn, and afforded Mrs. Crewe material for much mental calculation of the amount spent by her delightful friend Mr. Piers on railway fares. In this scheme Laura took the warmest interest, and under Reginald's direction made various designs of possible façades, which were of course pooh-poohed by the architect.

Yet, in spite of this congenial occupation, of the frequent presence of her *fiancé*, the sympathetic companionship of her cousin, the gray cloud which had fallen on Laura's

spirit the day of Lady Jervois's visit never wholly left her. Besides, though no eye could perceive the smallest change, Laura felt there was a subtle difference, not so much in Reginald as in herself; she involuntarily thought of what she was going to say before she said it, and felt that an impalpable 'something' had arisen between them.

Meantime Mrs. Piers still lingered in France. Reginald from time to time mentioned having had letters from his mother, but the question of her consent to his marriage was allowed to rest.

One morning, about a month or six weeks after Lady Jervois had left town, Mrs. Crewe had asked Laura to accompany her to make some important purchase for which she had been saving up shillings and sixpences pared from the 'house-money' and stored in a little paper trunk which had once contained bonbons, and had been presented to her by Herbert in an unusual fit of politeness.

Winnie stayed at home, settling herself to write to Herbert, and also to her brother in Bombay.

All was very still, the windows of the dining room were open, and through them the odour of the flowers came softly on the warm air, while Winnie, in a black-and-white morning-gown drawn in at her waist by a black band, the open sleeves showing something of her creamy arms, looked charmingly graceful, and felt delightfully at ease and safe from interruption; for Denzil had gone to town, and Reginald was to start that morning at some early hour for Pierslynn. She had finished her Indian letter, and had commenced the other, when the door opened and Reginald Piers walked in.

'Reginald!' cried Winnie, greatly astonished. 'I imagined you nearly at Pierslynn by this time.'

'And I should have been,' returned Reginald, throwing himself into an armchair, 'but for that stupid fellow of mine, who was so confoundedly slow about everything this morning that I just missed the morning train; so I came up here to have a look at you all before I go.'

'Laura and Mrs. Crewe are out,' said Winnie, feeling an odd unusual sensation of embarrassment, for there was a something curiously sombre and intense in Reginald's eyes.

After a few minutes' silence Winnie exclaimed, holding up the sheets she had covered :

'Look ! Have I not written Dick a long letter ? Does your sister treat you as well ?'

'She treats me better—she writes briefly.'

'Very well ! If I ever have to write to you, I will remember your taste.'

'I do not suppose, Winnie, we shall have to write to each other often. You know, Laura and I intend you to be our sister,—eh, Winnie ?'

'You are really too kind and good, dear Reginald,' she replied. 'I do not know what I have done to deserve such friendship.'

'Don't call me "dear Reginald,"' said he ; 'you know you do not care a rap about me—except so far as I am of importance to Laura.'

'Indeed, indeed I do,' exclaimed Winifrid earnestly. 'You are wonderfully good to me. I should be ungrateful if I did not like you.'

'Ungrateful !' he repeated, gazing at her with the same sombre intense expression which had disturbed her when he first came in. 'I do not want gratitude ; I want your —' he paused—'sisterly regard,' and he laughed again.

'Well, I am sure you have it,' replied Winnie shortly.

'As we are alone,' recommenced Reginald, rousing himself with a sort of effort, and rising to put a little water-colour drawing on the opposite wall straight—'we are alone, are we not, Winnie?—not a soul in the house except ourselves ? Well, as we are actually alone, I want to secure your help. Winnie ! will you help me to persuade Laura that it is unjust and unwise to postpone our marriage on account of my mother's opposition ? She considers her pride more than my happiness. You would not act in the same way.'

'Yes, I should, Reggie ; though I do think Mrs. Piers is rather unreasonable. Wait till she comes back—she may be in a better humour. Believe me, the real obstacle is the Admiral ; if *he* thought you might marry without your mother's consent, I do not think Laura would long hesitate ; but—'

'Ah, Winnie,' interrupted Reginald ; 'you do not know

how this indefinite postponement of our marriage unsettles me ; Laura will bitterly regret hereafter if, owing to her cold-hearted delay, unforeseen hindrances arise.'

'What is the matter with you to-day?' interrupted Winnie, in her turn. 'You are talking rank treason : Laura cold-hearted ! You must not say such things to me.'

'No, I ought not : nor will I, if you promise to do all you can to induce her to let our marriage take place, say, before Christmas.'

'I will try and persuade the Admiral. He is the most important person to win over.'

'Thank you, sweet friend,' said Reginald softly, as he sat down beside her and took her hand, holding it with a gentle, lingering pressure. 'You will always be my friend, dear Winnie ? I want your sympathy and friendship more than I can express ; there are difficulties before me which I cannot explain now, but in which your help might be all-important. And then, we both love Laura so truly and deeply that we may well share the task of shielding her from the ruggedness of life. You will always let me confide in you ?'

'Yes, of course,' said Winnie, feeling half frightened at the idea of mysterious difficulties thus suggested, yet finding something wondrously attractive in Reginald's unusual softness. 'I would do anything in the world for Laura, and, indeed, for you too, Reginald ; but I think Laura is too wise and strong to want any one as a shield.'

She tried to draw away her hand as she spoke, and he slowly relaxed his hold.

'We all want help one from another,' he said, half to himself. 'I want you to remember, Winnie, that I count on you as a real friend. At any rate, Winnie, my dear little playfellow, you will give me some of the affection you lavish on Laura ?'

'Before long you will be united,' returned Winifrid. 'Indeed, you *are* now, if there is true love between you—so what I give to one belongs to both.'

'I suppose so,' said Reginald, with a low sigh ; and he sat for some time silently watching Winnie fold her letter and place it in its envelope.

There was another pause ; then Reginald began abruptly :

'Can you imagine what it is to come out to this cursed hole day after day, feeling that all my plans are hindered, my projects kept in abeyance, my future success endangered, all on account of the sentimental scruples of the girl who is to share my life, my fortune, my all, and to whom you will grant I have shown myself tolerably constant ?'

He started up and paced the room impatiently as he spoke.

'It is true,' said Winifrid. 'Yet grant, Reginald, it would be strange to hurry on your marriage without winning your mother's consent.'

'Perhaps so ; but we have been nearly three months at this game of winning, and are no further than when we started. By Jove ! it is very hard on me. If it were any other girl in the world, I would break with her. And then, there are temptations which I dare not name, that nearly drive me mad. Don't look so startled out of those big beautiful eyes of yours, Winnie ; I am the safer for relieving my mind, and you will do infinite good to Laura and to me by letting me confide in you. Do not think I undervalue Laura—she is golden ! Would she had a little more alloy ; there are times when it is heavenly to sit and talk calmly and reasonably with her, and hear the ring of the true metal ! But, Winnie, there are other moods, when I am driven by intense passion—by desperate temptation—to my own ruin ! Can you wonder, therefore, that I long for the rest and security of marriage ?'

'No. indeed,' cried Winifrid, much moved. 'You would be infinitely happier if Laura were really your wife, always by your side ; and I will tell her so. But, Reginald, it astonishes me to hear you talk in this wild way. I always believed you to be cool-headed and wise, and so fortunate. What can have happened to upset you !'

Reginald, who had stopped by the window, muttered something about a 'confounded idiot ;' and then, turning to face the speaker, said with a constrained smile : 'I am a little ashamed of the exhibition I have made of myself. Pray forget it, and let me sometimes relieve my mind or heart, or whatever the thinking, feeling power within us may be, by displaying the weakness Laura would despise to you.'

'Ah, Reginald ! Laura would never despise you : she

is your truest friend. Nevertheless, you may trust me too, if I can be of any use to you !'

' You must tell Laura I was sorry not to see her ; tell her how anxious I am for our marriage. And now, Winnie, perhaps I had better go. Give me that rose you have in your dress. Did it come from Pierslynn ?'

' No ; and I cannot give it to you. Mr. Crewe brought it me.'

' Crewe brought it to you ?' repeated Reginald, his face changing, his brow contracting, and his light gray eyes blazing with sudden anger. ' Winifrid ! do you know where your coquetry towards that fellow is leading you ?'

' I really think you must be out of your mind, Reginald,' cried Winifrid. ' Can I not talk to an acquaintance without incurring your anger ? I am utterly unconscious of deserving your accusation.'

' Have I not heard you asking about his favourite songs, and raising your eyes to his, till I could have—till I wonder he did not propose to you on the spot ! How could you lay yourself open to the degradation of addresses from a fellow like that ?'

' Reginald, how can *you* be so unjust, so absurd ? Denzil Crewe is a true gentleman, and, what is more, a dear, good fellow. If I *cared* for him, I would marry him readily ; but I do not.'

' If such is your opinion, no doubt love will come !' He spoke with a sneer.

' Perhaps it will,' returned Winnie defiantly, and she burst into tears. ' You are unkind and cruel,' she faltered, struggling to regain self-control.

' I am an unreasonable brute,' said Reginald. ' And will not trouble you longer *at present* ; but, Winnie, if you will be to me the friend I hoped for, if you would soothe an irritation you cannot understand, do so much for me—give me that rose.'

Winifrid hesitated, trembled, raised her eyes to his, and then, as by a sudden impulse, caught the flower from her waistband and held it out to him.

With a gleam of triumph in his eyes, Reginald seized it and, first pressing it to his lips, tore it in pieces, and, strewing the fragments on the floor, hastily left the room.

CHAPTER XVII.

REGINALD PIERS's week of absence grew into a fortnight ; fresh guests arrived and fresh engagements arose ; it was necessary, he wrote, to establish his social position in Saltshire, which would be all the better for Laura hereafter. September was drawing to a close, and Mrs. Piers was still absent, but expected every day to return to her pretty little house at South Kensington.

'I am sure, Laura, when Mrs. Piers returns, and feels all the comfort that Reginald has provided for her, she will not oppose his happiness.'

The two girls were together in Laura's room, making some slight change of toilet. Winnie had declared herself too weary and lazy to mount to her own room, and so Laura brushed her hair and put it up for her.

'Perhaps it may seem to her all the more a duty to prevent his making an unsuitable match.'

'If she should continue obstinate, Laura,' exclaimed Winifrid, turning with impressive earnestness to her cousin, 'you must do your duty, and marry Reginald in spite of all opposition.'

'What, in spite of the Admiral's?' cried Laura, struck by her manner.

'Yes, even in spite of his!' returned Winnie solemnly. 'Oh! Laura, if you heard all he said the last day he was here ; the way he spoke of his wretched, unsettled life, his need of your companionship, the great necessity you are to him, you would not hesitate! I know what your heart would prompt you to do. Oh, Laura, listen to it and be wise.'

Winnie uttered these last words with a half-suppressed sob, and caught Laura's hand in both hers.

'Dear Winnie!' exclaimed her cousin, greatly startled by her vehemence, 'what harm can arise from a little dutiful observance of a parent's wishes? Reginald has everything to make him happy, and if he thinks so much of such an item as myself it is but the question of a few

months more or less, and all will be as he wishes, and as I wish ; for you know, Winnie dear, that my whole heart is his !'

'I do ! I firmly believe it is,' cried Winifrid, 'and you must prove it ! I only wish we could get the Admiral to come up to town, and I would speak to him ; you know I can do more with him than any one else.'

'One would think my dear good guardian was some ordinary, choleric, unreasonable old gentleman,' said Laura, smiling.

'Come, tea must be ready,' said Winnie restlessly. 'I believe our interesting next-door neighbours are to be here to-night ; indeed, I rather hope so. Anything is better than the perpetual "Do try and eat, Winnie dear ! Try a little more of this or that. Are you sure you have not over-fatigued yourself ? Pray sit in the easy-chair," of poor Mrs. Crewe.'

'Really, Winnie, you are very ungrateful !'

'Yes, I know I am ! If you only understood how I hate to be questioned and noticed and tormented, you would wonder at my not flying at every one who speaks to me ! The only creature with any sense is Denzil ; it is quite refreshing to be with him—he never takes any notice of me.'

In the evening Winnie went mechanically to the piano, and wandered away into vague chords, which presently passed into airs, ballads, and waltzes.

After a while Denzil took his favourite seat in a dusky corner at the end of the piano, where he could see the player's face. Denzil Crewe was a seaman by nature. He possessed that peculiar kind of watchfulness so essential to those who occupy themselves in the great waters, which is as far from suspicion as the east is from the west, but from which nothing escapes. To him quiet contemplation was pure pleasure. Too strong and deep to be buffeted by the contending eddies of conceit, he could afford to appreciate others for themselves alone, irrespective of their recognition or non-recognition of his merits. To such a character belongs a high degree of insight into the minds and motives of those with whom it comes in contact ; and Denzil had a certain sound solidity of judgment that gave him weight

in the eyes of his employers. Free as he was from egotism, he yet had full faith in himself.

Of these characteristics Winifrid saw very little. To her Denzil was just a quiet, ordinary, good-natured fellow, with a sort of delicacy which she recognised dimly, by feeling particularly at ease with him; while he thought her the fairest, sweetest, daintiest morsel of female life he had ever encountered. Nothing save strong habitual self-control kept him from falling deeply, desperately in love—self-control and equally habitual observation.

'You are fond of Scotch airs, are you not?' Winnie said at last, a little ashamed of her own disregard of him. 'I wish I knew more of them.'

'I like all music,' he returned.

She looked up as he spoke, and encountered a gaze so thoughtful, so pitying, that it caused a curious feeling of apprehension and annoyance.

'You need not look like that, Mr. Crewe,' she said impatiently; 'one would think I was going to die, and I am not going to do anything of the kind. If every one would leave me alone, I should be well in a week.'

'Still'—with a long searching look—'you have not been yourself. I can see—though I may be intrusive in saying so—that you have suffered.'

'No, no; you are never intrusive. I have felt very good-for-nothing, and I fear I have been cross and ill-natured as well. But if you only knew how I hate being asked about myself—'

'I would never do so; yet let me make a suggestion. The best remedy for the sort of low fever that seems to hang about you is change of scene and air. You must have friends in Germany who would be delighted to receive you?' said Denzil, rising, and coming over to lean on the piano.

'In Germany!' cried Winnie, her great eyes dilating. 'Yes, of course! What a stupid creature I am not to have thought of it! A thousand thanks for the suggestion!'

He smiled, a kindly, admiring smile, and as they were thus posed—she with her great questioning eyes raised to his, which rested tenderly, almost sadly, on her—the door opened suddenly to admit Reginald Piers.

The first object that met his view was the group thus formed. For an instant he paused, and turned as if to approach them, but the next he advanced smiling to Laura, who started from her seat, the colour flaming up in her cheek and then leaving her paler than before, while the words of welcome faltered in expressive eagerness on her lips.

Having spoken pleasantly with Mrs. Crewe, Reginald turned to Winifrid, who had risen from the piano at his entrance with a half-uttered exclamation.

'Well, Winnie——' he began with a curl of the lip, when his whole expression changed as his eyes fell upon her. 'Good God!' he exclaimed, 'what have you been doing to yourself! you are looking—not well.'

'There,' cried Mrs. Crewe, 'I thought you would notice it. She is exceedingly *unwell*, Mr. Piers, and she is as obstinate as—a mule, if you will excuse my saying so! Miss Fielden is in a very low state—no appetite, no spirits, no nothing; and she will not adopt any remedy.'

While Mrs. Crewe ran on with her complaints, Reginald still held Winnie's hand, with a look under which she grew first crimson and then white.

'Laura,' he exclaimed, not heeding Mrs. Crewe's flow of words, 'why did you not tell me?'

'Winnie positively forbade my doing so.'

'Oh, there was nothing to write about,' said Winnie, shrinking back. 'Every one is determined to make "much ado about nothing." Pray do not add yourself to the number of my kind tormentors.'

'We shall see. I must insist on a doctor if the next few days do not show some improvement,' replied Reginald.

Then Laura placed herself on the sofa, Reginald threw himself into an armchair, and Winnie produced her work.

'The reason of my sudden appearance,' began Reginald, addressing Laura, 'is a letter from my mother, announcing her intention to cross from Calais to-morrow and to be in London by dinner-time. She writes in excellent spirits, and I hope the best results from her Continental wanderings.'

At the mention of his mother Laura involuntarily clasped her hands, and Winnie dropped her work.

Reginald laughed a somewhat mocking laugh.

'Well, Laura, is there anything so very awful about my mother?'

'Your mother *is* formidable to me, Reginald,' returned Laura, in a low voice. 'Can you wonder at it?'

'If you thought more of her son, she would soon lose her terrors.'

'I wish the Admiral were in town,' was Laura's apparently irrelevant reply.

'Do you?' said Reginald, looking down thoughtfully. 'I will write and tell him to come.'

At last, after another fit of thought, Reginald exclaimed:

'Laura, I want to say a word to you. May we go into the dining-room, Mrs. Crewe?'

'Of course you may,' said that lady benignly.

'I shall not be able to see you to-morrow, dearest Laura,' he said, taking her hand when they were alone. 'I want to be a good deal with my mother. Believe me, I shall leave nothing undone to win her consent. But if she be obdurate, *if* she refuses to hear reason, will you be my own, come what may?'

'Reginald, I cannot refuse you anything—if only the Admiral could be brought to see matters as we do.'

'He shall, I will answer for him. He, then, is the last obstacle? Leave him to me. And you love me, Laura? You think I can make you happy?'

'Ah, *how happy!*' whispered Laura.

'By heaven!' he exclaimed passionately, 'it shall be no fault of mine if you are not.' There was a pause, and then he went on in his ordinary tone, 'You are such a wise woman, Laura, that I want your opinion about Winnie. Is she not playing very recklessly with—with that fellow Denzil Crewe, or—is it possible she cares for him? He is no match for her. I should not like my wife's cousin to be married to the skipper of a cargo-ship.'

'Oh, Reginald, Winnie is no coquette! nor do I think she cares as you mean for Mr. Crewe. She likes him, and he amuses her; but, if you think for a moment, you will see that Denzil Crewe is not beneath her. He is as well born, and, though so plain and simple, he is well-bred; his prospects are very fair, and if she loved him I see no reason why she should not—'

'Marry him!' interrupted Reginald, in a sharp, angry voice; 'Laura, you drive me mad by such absurdity! I look on Winifrid as my—my sister, and I intend her to make a brilliant marriage. I don't approve of "all for love, and the world well lost."

She stood silent, quite at a loss how to answer.

'Never mind!' exclaimed Reginald, after waiting for her to speak; 'why should we trouble ourselves about other people's affairs? Good-night, dear Laura. If you do not see me for a couple of days, you may be sure I am looking after our mutual interests. Make my adieux to Mrs. Crewe: I cannot face the party again.'

But Mrs. Piers did not come home better disposed to her son's views. She was in better temper, it is true, and full of gratitude for all his generosity; in short, save in one direction, he could do no wrong, and on that subject she declined to speak. She offered no opposition, but always retained her original form. Thus more days glided past, and Reginald was constant in his visits to Leamington Road.

About a week after Reginald's return from Pierslynn the afternoon post brought Winnie a letter. The cousins were in Laura's little painting-room, where she was trying to take Winnie's likeness—not very successfully; and Reginald was lazily looking on.

'A letter, dear Winnie!' cried Laura, for letters were an event to both girls; 'is it from the Admiral?'

'No,' she said, 'it is from Fräulein von Biedermann. She invites me to go and stay with them for a little change; she thinks it would do me so much good.'

'Who on earth is Fräulein von Biedermann?' asked Reginald.

'How did she know you have not been well?' asked Laura.

'The Biedermanns,' said Winifrid, choosing to answer the first question, 'are Dresden people. We were *en pension* with them when we first went there, and Fräulein von Biedermann taught us German, so we have always been great friends. They are really very nice and kind, and the old Baron is quite charming.'

'That is the nobleman who takes in boarders?' said Reginald gravely.

'Well, Reggie,' cried Winifrid quickly, 'he is none the less noble for that. If he is poor, surely it is better to earn money honestly than to get in debt or starve.'

'True, O queen! And so these noble friends propose that you should pay them a visit. Of course you will not go?'

'Why not? It would be a great pleasure for me, and—'

'It might do you good, Winnie,' said Laura thoughtfully, 'though it would be sad, too, to revisit the place where we were so happy with your dear father. But I do not see how it is to be managed; you would hardly like to ask the Admiral yet.'

'Exactly!' cried Winnie, 'that is the difficulty. It is so odious to have no money at all of one's own. I do want so much to go to Dresden.'

'But it would not be worth while to go all that way for a short stay, Winnie,' said Reginald, in his softest, smoothest manner; 'and very probably both Laura and I shall want you next month; you do not suppose either of us could go through the tremendous ceremony of turning Miss into Mrs. Piers without your countenance and support?'

'Next month? Do you really think it will be so soon?' exclaimed Winnie, opening her eyes.

'I say it must,' returned Reginald resolutely, but pleasantly. 'I am tired of being a shuttlecock, and have written to the Admiral to that effect. Yes, Laura! you must make up your mind; my patience is exhausted.'

'Reginald—' Laura began, but Winnie interrupted her.

'Even for a month I should like to go, Laura; Fräulein Bertha asks me really as a guest, so there is only my railway fare to think of, and I feel it would do me so much good. I am sure the Admiral would not mind—if—if only some one would ask him. I wish *you* would, Reggie.'

'The railway and steamer would cost quite ten pounds to go and return,' remarked Laura softly. 'I do think you want a change, Winnie, but not so far away! We could

scarcely ask anything from the Admiral ; he has done so much already.'

'I wish—I wish I could go !' exclaimed Winnie, with a sort of sob, and then she rose, and, crushing up the letter in her hand, ran out of the room.

'What can be the matter with Winnie ?' cried Laura, 'I am quite uneasy about her. She used always to be so sensible and contented.'

'How can I possibly explain the vagaries of a young lady ?' returned Reginald. 'Has Winnie any German cavalier who may possibly attract her Dresdenwards ?'

'No, no, certainly not ; Winnie never had the shadow of a flirtation with any one.'

'Are you sure you knew all Winnie's secrets ? Young ladies are often too profound for their dearest friends where love is concerned.'

There was a tinge of mockery and hardness in Reginald's tone as he said this that wounded and alarmed Laura.

'How little you know her, Reginald !' she cried. 'She is all truth and straightforwardness ; she likes girlish fun, and cannot help enjoying the admiration she always meets ; but I do not think she ever hid a thought from me. Why, I should cease to believe if I doubted Winnie !'

'And I should doubt my own existence before I doubted *you*, Laura,' Reginald said. 'But it is not given to every woman to be true, and Winnie'—he paused, and then exclaimed, 'You do not think she is really unwell ?—you know I am very fond of her, were it only for your sake.'

'I do think that something disturbs her and makes her unlike herself ; but what—I, who know every hour of her life, cannot imagine. I suppose it is that she is suffering physically ; I fear that the months she passed at Liverpool tried her more than we thought.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE second morning after this visit brought a note from Mrs. Trent, who had returned to town, inviting Laura to luncheon.

'Really a polite attention,' said Mrs. Crewe, stroking Toppy, who was sitting gravely in her lap, while Laura read aloud the note. 'I wonder, now, if you were not engaged to a distinguished person like Mr. Piers, would she be so considerate?'

'I am sure I do not know,' returned Laura indifferently. 'I imagine, from the way I feel towards her, that she likes me a little for my own sake; at any rate, it is pleasant to think so.'

'What a mercy it is you have a nice new dress at last!' said Mrs. Crewe; 'for of course you will accept her invitation. I daresay you will meet Mr. Piers there. Dear me, Laura, what a change it will be for you to be Mrs. Piers of Pierslynn, with unlimited credit at a court milliner's! By the way, has Mr. Piers ever said anything to you about pin-money? because I would have it clearly defined. It is so miserable and degrading to have to ask your husband for every trifle you want.'

Next morning Mrs. Crewe had a mysterious errand in 'the City'; she therefore started with her dear young friend, intending to walk with her as far as Cleveland Square, where they parted, and Laura proceeded to Mrs. Trent's house.

'If you please, 'm,' said the man out of livery who opened the door, 'Mrs. Trent has been called away; she has left a note for you, 'm, if you will walk in!'

Laura felt disappointed, but read with hearty sympathy the note presented to her.

'I have had a telegram from Blackheath, telling me of an accident to my second boy, who is at school there. I am just going off to him. So sorry to be obliged to miss you, for every reason.'

Laura hesitated as the door closed, and then decided to go on to an artist's colour shop in the Edgware Road, and return by train.

Meantime Winifrid went to Laura's painting-room, and set to work to dust and arrange it. She moved languidly, with many a pause; yet she did her work thoroughly, and finished by placing a prettily-filled basket of mignonette and scarlet geraniums on a side-table.

Winifrid then set the garden door open to let in light and air, and took up a piece of elaborate lace-work she had begun in Dresden. But she made no progress : her blue eyes filled with tears, and an impatient expression quivered round her lips.

'I must go,' she murmured ; 'I must.'

Then she started and a frightened look came into her face as a sharp peal of the front-door bell struck her ear. She rose up quickly, as if she would escape, and stopped irresolute ; next moment Reginald Piers entered, and without approaching or offering to shake hands, sat down.

'So Laura is gone to luncheon at the Trents' ?'

'Yes.'

Reginald looked away into the garden, and Winifrid stole a curious glance at him. His expression was for the moment natural and unguarded. It betrayed a depth of weariness, a sort of fierce unrest, strange in one who was so favoured by fortune.

'Have you not heard yet from the Admiral ?' asked Winifrid timidly.

'Yes,' said Reginald, rousing himself. 'I had a letter this morning. He is coming up to town the day after to-morrow, prepared to bring matters to a decision, he says.'

'The day after to-morrow !' cried Winnie. 'I am so glad ; I shall show him Fräulein Bertha's letter.'

'What ! do you *really* think of going to Germany ?' asked Reginald, changing his seat for one beside hers.

'Yes, I do.'

'What is your real motive ? I wish you would be frank with me, Winnie ! Do you think, because I do not add the torment of my questions to what you must daily endure, that I do not care what you suffer ? I think of you, and am haunted by the change I see in you night and day. Is there anything between Denzil Crewe and yourself ? I cannot but see that he dares to love you, and his idiotic mother's hints and chatter nearly drive me wild ! Winnie ! Good heavens ! You are not afraid of *me*—of your truest—most devoted—friend !'

Winnie had grown deadly pale, and shrank back when he tried to take her hand.

'You must not speak in that way,' she said. 'As for Denzil—you are quite mistaken, quite. And you ought not to speak to me as you do, when we are alone; you frighten me—you distress me. I cannot tell where the wrong *is*, but it is wrong, and I feel as if I could go to the ends of the earth to escape it. Yet, when I see you are unhappy, I would do anything I could to comfort you. It all makes me miserable!'

'Winnie,' returned Reginald, in a low, deep voice, and catching her hands in spite of her, 'is it possible that we are both suffering from the same cause?'

'Let me go, Reginald!' she exclaimed. 'I must not—will not—listen to you.'

'You shall!' he cried, keeping her hands in a grasp from which she could not release them. His self-control was gone—he saw nothing beyond the graceful, shrinking figure, the sweet, trembling lips, the tender yet half-resentful eyes raised to his imploringly. 'Come what may, there shall be complete understanding between us. You *shall* hear me, because you make my life half agony, half enchantment! I love you as I never dreamed I should love! Tell me, if I were free, could you love me?'

'Reginald—oh, Reginald—for Heaven's sake, stop! Even if I am so unfortunate as to have called forth these feelings—can you not, for my sake as well as for Laura's, bury them in silence? A firm determination to master them would ensure success.'

'Which I would not, if I could, secure,' he returned, gazing at her as if he would penetrate the secrets of her heart. 'There is but one means to ensure Laura's happiness, which is dear to us both—give me the love I crave for! It will be our own precious, impenetrable secret,' he went on rapidly, passionately. 'Supported by the sense of your sympathy, I can fulfil every duty! If you compassionate the torture I have undergone for the last month—if—'

'It is too late to ask for such assurances, Reginald,' said Winnie sadly, but with more firmness than he expected. 'What you dream is an impossible piece of treachery. You *must* be true! Laura deserves your whole heart. Do not imagine that I am cold or indifferent. I—I feel—that

we must *both* be brave ; it is for you to set me the example.'

'Enough !' cried Reginald, his eyes kindling, his voice thrilling with passionate tenderness. ' You will, then, give me the affection that it is out of my power to ask for openly. You will be mine in spirit, though it is too late to ask you to be so in face of the world !'

As he uttered the last words a shadow fell on the glass of the garden door, and both speakers felt as if turned to stone by the unexpected presence of Laura.

' No,' said she, with a sort of painful deliberation. ' It is not yet too late, Reginald !'

There was a moment's dead silence.

Then Reginald, forcing himself to speak, asked with angry scorn, ' Pray, how long have you been listening ?'

' I do not know,' said Laura, ' for an instant—for an age—I cannot tell, and I had no choice. I could not move after the first words I heard. Far, far better for us all that I did not so !'

Putting her hand to her brow, she sat down on a chair by the half-finished portrait of Winnie.

' Go, Reginald,' she said ; ' leave us together.'

CHAPTER XIX.

FOR a moment the terrible silence was unbroken ; then Winnie sprang forward, and, kneeling beside Laura, put her head on her lap, with a keen cry of pain :

' Laura! Laura! I did not mean to be a traitor. What shall I do ? what shall I do ?'

Laura disengaged herself gently but resolutely, and stood up.

' No, Winnie. I cannot think you are intentionally a traitor, but it is all so hard, so incomprehensible. You must give me time. Help me,' she added hastily, ' to keep Mrs. Crewe in the dark for a little while. This cannot long be hidden. How can I have been so blind ! Let me go ! I cannot bear to be with you *now*, I must be

alone. Tell Mrs. Crewe I have a bad headache—that I am lying down—anything !'

Winfred looked after her without daring to follow, with an expression of unspeakable sorrowful longing in her large liquid blue eyes. For Winnie *was* true ; at that moment she would have gladly agreed never to see or speak to Reginald again, could she but gain the power to display her inmost heart to Laura. But, alas ! the heart cannot be shown, it has to be translated into the imperfect medium of words. How keenly the consciousness of this cut into Winnie's soul, as she stood there motionless, living over again her childhood and early youth ! With every small vividly-remembered detail, Laura was associated in the closest and most loving companionship. In her play, her tasks, her little difficulties, her slight indispositions, it was Laura who was always her friend, her helper, her unselfish sympathiser, always patient, always self-forgetful ; and in return she had robbed her of the one rich jewel that had come to crown her girlhood with joy. What evil fate had overtaken her ? How could she atone for or repair the wrong she had unconsciously wrought ? How well she remembered every incident of her almost daily intercourse with Reginald ! How much, how frankly, she had liked him at first ! How heartily she had rejoiced in Laura's happy prospects ; how gradually and imperceptibly her pleasure in his society had increased ; till one day some word, or glance, or smile of his, betrayed an unexpected, fearful, delicious mutual understanding, a something that had grown between them, hidden and unheeded, till it sprang to sudden life—and after that there was no more peace ! It was not, however, until the day that Reginald had contrived to see her alone, and entreated her to use her influence with Laura in his favour, that she felt the full danger of her position. She could not shake off the effect of that interview, and she honestly strove to find a way of escape from the difficulties it had drawn round her.

What would the Admiral say ? What would Mrs. Crewe say ? How could she face it all ? Look which way she would, the position was dreadful, and she had not a friend in the world with whom she could take counsel.

Meantime the object of her thoughts, doing her own

hard battle in the silence of her chamber, was scarcely so much to be pitied as the author of her sufferings. Laura had no reproaches of conscience to undergo. She dimly felt that a blow had fallen upon her, which shivered into a thousand atoms the lovely world of love and joy and bright anticipation in which she had lived for the last three months ; and she lay prostrate, quivering with an impotent life whose only distinct sensation was pain. Why, it was not an hour ago since she had come up the steps, with her parcel of purchases, thinking chiefly of Mrs. Trent's anxiety, but also glad to come back to Winnie, and talk over the little occurrences of the day with the easy confidence which makes one great charm of life. She remembered speaking cheerfully to Collins, who was cleaning the bell pull, and so walking into the hall with a light heart, always brightened by the glow in her life's horizon ; glancing at the table to see if a note awaited her from Reginald ; then seeing through the open door leading to the garden the cat lying in a bed of mignonette—an indulgence strictly forbidden. She went down the steps to lift Toppy out. Her ear was caught by Winifrid's voice, and, walking to the entrance of the painting-room, she heard Reginald, in tones such as he had never used to her, exclaim, 'Give me the love I crave.' Far more than anything else, the ring of Reginald's words told her she had never been *loved*, only liked, esteemed, preferred. Nothing could ever obliterate *that* knowledge, and in all the agony and humiliation of the moment Laura could raise her heart in thankfulness to God for granting her this knowledge *before* the irrevocable words were spoken, which only death or disgrace can recall. But Winifrid !—must she lose both friend and lover too ?

It was ever after a sort of dim, horrid wonder to Winifrid how she lived through that terrible evening ; how she kept an unbroken front, and turned aside Mrs. Crewe's importunate hospitalities ; how she met Denzil's grave searching eyes, and kept her dazed brain, which seemed full of vague cruel echoes, clear enough to answer coherently in her usual tone, when she could scarce keep from crying aloud for help and forgiveness.

At length Mrs. Crewe insisted on taking a large cup of tea, a plateful of cold roast beef and horse-radish sauce, with a supply of preserved plums and some seed-cake, to Laura, who still kept her room on the plea of headache, and Winnie, as a last effort of devotion to her friend—her victim!—ran on before, to warn her what was coming. Then she returned to the dining-room, unable to bear herself alone, yet dimly afraid of Denzil's eyes.

'It is cold this evening,' said Denzil; 'at least, cold for the season.'

'It is indeed,' exclaimed Winnie, in a startled, abrupt tone, such as Denzil had noticed once or twice before during the evening meal. 'Do you not think, Mr. Crewe, that it would be very nice if I could go to Germany for the winter? I have not been at all well, you know. If you were to tell Mrs. Crewe and the Admiral, they might think of it seriously. *I do want a change.*'

And poor Winnie, her heart bursting with a sense of guilt and sorrow and a wild longing to run away, came and stood on the hearthrug beside him.

'I see you are far from well, Miss Fielden. I could not venture to speak to the Admiral on such a matter, but I will strongly advise my mother to back you up. I too think it is very desirable you should have change of scene.'

Although there was not the slightest significance in his tone, Winnie started, and turned first crimson and then pale.

'Why—why do you think so?' she exclaimed, with nervous eagerness; 'do you think me so very ill, or—'

'I think there must be a strong necessity, as you confess it, having till now so steadily denied that there was anything the matter with you,' and he bent towards her with a grave, kindly smile; and a very serious look in his deep eyes. 'Speak to your cousin about it; I am certain she is your best and kindest counsellor.'

'She is—there is no one like her!' cried Winnie, with a little sob, and struggling bravely with her tears. 'I will speak to her to-morrow, and now I will go to bed. I feel ill and tired.'

'Can we—can my mother do nothing for you?'

'Oh, no, no, no !'

Denzil was startled at the despair of her 'no,' and almost unconsciously caught her hand in both his own.

'What has happened ?' escaped his lips before he could check the words.

'Nothing—nothing,' began Winnie, terrified at her own want of caution, when the door opened to admit Mrs. Crewe, bearing the beef, preserve, and cake untouched.

'I understand the headache now,' she said. 'They have had a lover's quarrel ! I did not think Laura would take it so much to heart ; she did not want to say anything on the subject. But my penetration and experience are not to be baffled ! They have quarrelled over that tiresome mother of his, and Mr. Piers went off in a rage. Really lovers are very troublesome. We must have everything straight and smooth before the Admiral comes the day after to-morrow. Winnie dear, don't mind going up again to Laura ; she says she wants to get to sleep.'

'Very well, Mrs. Crewe,' faltered Winnie, cut to the soul by this evidence of estrangement, even while she dreaded to be alone with her cousin. 'I was just going to bed myself ; I feel so tired, and—and—good-night, Mr. Crewe—good-night ;' giving her hand to his mother, she left the room hastily.

'Between you and me, Denzil,' said Mrs. Crewe confidentially, 'I fear these foolish young people have quarrelled rather bitterly. Laura is a little obstinate.'

'Mother !' cried Denzil impatiently, 'don't you see that Winnie is ill and suffering, as well as her cousin ?'

'Dear me ! is she ?' cried Mrs. Crewe, starting up. 'I shall just mix her a little sherry with hot water and sugar, and a dust of nutmeg on the top. It is excellent to send any one to sleep,' and she hurried away.

Mrs. Crewe was truly rejoiced next morning at the intelligence that Mr. Piers had just come, and had gone into the drawing-room to wait for Miss Laura.

An hour passed—and half an hour more—and still the conference in the drawing-room had not come to an end.

'At any rate, I might go in and see how they are going

on now,' said Mrs. Crewe to herself, and descended to the hall with this intention.

As she reached it, Reginald Piers came quickly out of the drawing-room. He looked pale, stern, unlike himself; there was something in his expression that startled Mrs. Crewe with a sudden conviction that things were very wrong indeed.

'My dear Mr. Piers——' she began uneasily.

'Forgive me,' he returned in a harsh, abrupt tone, 'I am pressed for time. I cannot stop to speak now;' and he almost rushed away, shutting the front-door violently behind him.

'My dear Laura, what is the meaning of this?' said Mrs. Crewe with majesty, as she entered the room. 'My age and knowledge of the world, to say nothing of the deep interest I take in you, authorise me to speak as a mother. You are trying that charming *fiancé* of yours too far; deference to a parent's whims may be exaggerated, and misunderstandings may arise, fatal to your happiness. You may lose him, Laura——'

'I have lost him,' said Laura, in a low, resolute voice, standing still and pale and cold before her. 'Our difference of opinion is too great to be accommodated; I grieve to cause such disappointment, but it is all over.'

'Gracious goodness! What madness! What on earth is it all about? You will have that young man's life to answer for—mark my words! I am disappointed in you, Laura!'

'I am afraid you are; you must be,' returned Laura, in a strange mechanical manner. 'But, dear Mrs. Crewe, you must have patience with me. When I have seen the Admiral I will explain more, but now I cannot. Where is Winnie? I want to see her; I——'

'Oh, if the affair is to be a mystery, I am the last to intrude,' said Mrs. Crewe, with much dignity. 'But as to Winnie, there is another puzzle! She is gone off this morning—goodness knows where!—without a word to any one.'

'Gone off!' echoed Laura in a tone of alarm, and with such a look of dismay dilating her eyes that Mrs. Crewe felt some tragedy must be on the point of discovery.

'I mean, she has gone out and said nothing to me as to where she was going. I daresay she will be in by dinner-time.'

But dinner was half over before Winnie appeared, and then she seemed hurried and slightly excited. She tried to turn aside Mrs. Crewe's queries with forced sprightliness, stating, to that lady's great bewilderment, that she would give an account of herself when she had spoken to the Admiral; after which Mrs. Crewe took refuge in dignified silence, and dinner passed in mute discomfort, such as none of the trio had ever before experienced in that cheerful, kindly house.

Both girls felt it insupportable.

'Come with me, Winnie,' said Laura, forcing herself to speak in her natural voice.

Though Winnie's cruelly-sharpened observation detected a perceptible change in her tones, she obeyed the summons.

When the cousins reached Laura's chamber and had closed the door, Winnie stood near it with a downcast, embarrassed air, her fingers clasping and unclasping each other, and her large speaking eyes averted.

'Where *have* you been, Winnie?' began Laura, in something of the usual motherly tone her cousin knew so well. 'I was frightened about you. I feared I knew not what.'

'Were you frightened about me, Laura?' cried Winnie, making a step forward, and then stopping as if she must not come nearer. 'Do you care enough about me still?'

'Can you doubt it?' returned Laura in a stifled tone, yet not advancing to her.

'Well, I will tell you what I have been about,' exclaimed Winnie, with an attempt at gaiety. 'You know how ashamed I have been of my idleness and uselessness, and so I went away to the Governesses' Institution, and heard all about it. I am to bring a letter of recommendation from some lady—Mrs. Trent, I suppose, will do—and I had quite a long talk with the lady superintendent. She asked what I could teach, and seemed pleased to hear I knew German and music; she begged me to get the letter soon, because she thought I might just suit a lady in the country somewhere. So, dear, I shall go there and begin to make my fortune; and then, Laura, things will come right

when I am out of the way, you know, and—Reggie will forget the sort of madness that came over him for a moment—I am sure he is ashamed of it by this time—and then—why, we shall be happy once more !'

Winnie brought all this out in a great hurry, and with an immense effort at light-hearted cheerfulness ; but at the end of her speech she faltered, and raised her eyes with a wonderfully pathetic look of entreaty to her cousin.

Laura returned her gaze with a sombre, unsympathetic expression.

'Do you really believe that *anything* could restore to us yesterday morning ?' she replied, in a slow, deliberate voice. 'Do you not rather feel that not even a miracle could make us as we were ? There are things which no power can undo. I have deliberately and finally released Reginald to-day from our engagement.'

'Then he has been here ! You have seen him ! Oh, what did he say ? how did he bear meeting you ?'

'I cannot understand Reginald,' said Laura. 'Why should he have sought me when he did not love me ? for I know now he never loved me.'

'Oh yes, he did—he will !' interrupted Winnie.

'He is honourably disposed to fulfil his engagement with me,' Laura resumed, a little bitterly. 'He even urged our marriage, though he did not deny his love for *you*. He maintained that his high esteem and regard, and all that gray shadow of affection, would make us happier than intense passion, that you would never hear of uniting yourself to him after this terrible breach of faith, and—oh, much more that I have no patience to think of !' cried Laura, breaking off with a sudden burst of emotion. 'He seemed eager and earnest too,' she went on ; 'but the ring of his voice as he spoke to you yesterday has never left my ears ; there was *real* love in it—a tone it never had for me ; and you will be a far more acceptable daughter-in-law than I could ever be.'

'But I will never marry him,' cried Winnie, in an agony. 'You do not believe I would be so base, so unfeeling, so——'

'You will be his wife before a year is out,' said Laura, 'if *he* wishes it ; but he puzzles me.'

'Ah, Laura, do not turn from me, do not hate me !'

sobbed Winnie. ‘I never dreamed of doing you a wrong ; I loved you always, I love you now—let nothing separate us. I will do anything you like, if you will only believe in me, and let me stay with you.’

‘I do believe in you, Winnie ; but I must be alone for this day at least. Leave me ; I must bury my dead alone.’

CHAPTER XX.

THIS day of clouds and thick darkness was full of bitterness and wrath to Reginald Piers also. Never before had he felt the same maddening sense of impotent irritation. The feeling that he had destroyed his own well-arranged plan of life by a moment’s want of self-control—he who prided himself on clearness of purpose and firmness of will—was intolerable humiliation ; while he had the consciousness that for the first time accident, or circumstance, or whatever the apparently fortuitous combination of small events can be termed which constitutes luck, was against him. He had been so sure that Laura was safe out of the way for several hours, and he had not yet discovered what had brought her back so unexpectedly. He had lost her ! he knew that, and, despite his passion for her cousin, he felt that he had lost much.

‘She would have made me a capital wife,’ he reflected ; ‘she is so thoughtful and capable, besides . . . then, how tremendously she will feel it ! If she were a prettier woman there would be a better chance of her replacing me, though I fancy she is one of the constant kind. Why is it that a woman cannot see that, from the nature of things, many—most men can love two at once ? But how long would my love for Winifrid have remained ideal ?’

Under all his real regret and uneasiness, and dim dread of possible mischief from Laura’s resentment, was an under-current of vivid anticipation, a warm stream of hope, that sent its electric darts of fiery joy in sudden intermittent thrills down every vein. But he must be prudent ; he must do nothing rashly. For every reason he must conciliate Laura.

'She was always a wonderful girl for justice and common sense,' he thought. 'I wonder how she and Winnie are getting on together. My beautiful darling, you love me, in spite of your horror at your own unconscious treachery: but Winnie is quite capable of some tremendous piece of folly by way of atonement. High-toned, high-principled women are the deuce and all sometimes. I must not lose both: that would be too absurd. By heaven! I am half inclined to wish Hugh Piers had lived to hunt another day. But no, Pierslynn is worth many an untoward love-affair, and more than that. However, my first care must be to keep the thing quiet; Laura will help me there; my mother's opposition is a capital peg to hang delay on; and so—and so—my luck will not desert me yet.'

Reginald was engaged to dine that evening with the Trents; his hostess received him with her usual cordiality.

'I began to think we should never see you again,' she said.

'I am not surprised,' returned Reginald. 'The fact is, I have been "nowhere" for the last month, and now I am on the wing for Pierslynn again. Glad to see you looking, if possible, better than ever—and Katie?'

'Katie has gone to a children's birthday party at the other side of the Square. She is quite well, but we had a horrid fright yesterday. About twelve o'clock I had a telegram from Blackheath, to say that Willie had met with an accident. Of course I hurried off at once, and found he had had a bad fall, and, as the head-master was away, his wife, a nervous little woman, got into a fright lest anything should go wrong, and telegraphed for me. I was obliged to put off Laura Piers, whom I had asked to luncheon—after she was in the house too.'

Deeply did Reginald curse the unreasonable nervousness of that schoolmaster's wife.

After the cheese *soufflé* had gone round, Mr. Thurston, the only other guest, leaning back in his chair, said easily, 'Have you mentioned that proposition of Lord Dereham's to our friend here?'

'Not yet ; I left it to you,' replied Mr. Trent.

'It seems,' returned Mr. Thurston, playing with his eyeglass, 'that there is a farm lying between Lord Dereham's property and Pierslynn which belonged to his aunt ; she married a Pole or Hungarian. It has now passed to her daughter, who is a widow. These people have raised mortgages on it from time to time. Now the present possessor wishes to sell the property, and I rather fancy you can get it a bargain.'

'I know the place,' said Reginald thoughtfully. 'And so Madame Moscynska wishes to sell ? I met her at Dairysford, when I went over to shoot there last month ; but I could not have imagined her hard-up.'

'These nondescript princesses are pinchbeck all through,' observed Mr. Trent, with true British contempt for foreign titles.

'Poles are very charming people,' put in his wife ; 'and if they help one to pass some hours agreeably, I do not see why we are to quarrel with them because they are not capitalists.'

'Nor I,' said Reginald heartily. 'I assure you it is quite thrilling to hear Madame la Princesse talk of the wrongs of her country, and grind her pearly teeth at the name of Russia. But what do they want for the farm ?'

'I do not know, but I daresay you will get it cheap,' said Mr. Thurston.

'I will think about it,' remarked Reginald. 'Let Lord Dereham's people talk to Freshfield. At all events I am obliged to you for giving me a hint : for the present I shall keep out of Madame Moscynska's way ; I would rather buy from her representatives than from herself.'

'You are growing in worldly wisdom, Reginald,' said Mrs. Trent, smiling.

'I hope so. *A propos* of the opposite to worldly wisdom, do you know if Admiral Desbarres is in town ?'

'We expected him to-day,' replied Mr. Trent ; 'but I had a note this morning informing me that he could not leave his sister.'

'Indeed !' said Reginald ; and he thought if the Admiral could not come to town there was so much time gained.

'Ah, Reginald! you are a *preux chevalier* to leave the charms of conversation below for my tea-table,' said Mrs. Trent, when he entered the drawing-room. 'I suppose your mother has told you all about our life in Auvergne?'

'My mother has done nothing of the kind,' he returned. 'We have not had many conversations of late. I suppose she has confided her griefs to you?'

'Yes; she is rather put out about your wish to marry Miss Piers.'

'What is her great objection to Laura?' he asked.

'Her objections are numerous, but I must say I think the young lady seems very pleasing. No doubt Mrs. Piers will come round if you have patience.'

'Great heavens!' burst out Reginald, with unusual irritation. 'Have I *not* had patience? Have I not borne with my mother's crotchets and Laura's scruples until my life has been utterly spoiled? I have stood more than many men would; and I tell you, Mrs. Trent, if Laura continues to prefer her sentimental pride to my happiness, I will break with her.'

Mrs. Trent looked up startled, and hesitated a moment before she replied:

'My dear Reginald, I am sure you will do nothing hasty or unjust. I have always liked you for your fidelity to your first love; men may think it quixotic, but *I* do not. I really believe she will be an admirable wife. At the same time, you cannot wonder at your mother's objections.'

'I have a right to please myself in such a matter,' said Reginald moodily; 'but I have no right to make myself disagreeable to a friend like yourself.'

Laura was infinitely relieved to find she was not obliged to meet her guardian while still quivering from the blow that had fallen upon her. If time could be gained the affair might seem to die a natural death, and the scandal of a sudden break be avoided.

Winnie struggled bravely, and on the whole successfully, to maintain her usual seeming when the little circle of Leamington Road met together; but when alone with her cousin, there was a downcast air of innocent guilt (if such a contradiction in terms may be used), an eagerness to do

Laura any little services, a watchful care to save her trouble, accompanied by wistful looks quickly averted, as if she longed for some token of tenderness, yet dared not ask it, that spoke volumes to the elder girl.

Once Laura, overcome by the sweetness of her cousin's voice, which trembled in asking some ordinary question, and touched by her pale cheeks, suddenly threw her arms round her.

'Oh! Winnie, Winnie!' she cried, 'do not think me harsh or cruel because I am so still and silent! It would be false, dear, to say I love you now as I used, but I will—I will before long be just as loving as I was.'

'My own dear Laura! thank you, oh, thank you for saying so,' sobbed Winnie. 'Oh! let me speak to you, dearest, this once; perhaps it was just a little momentary madness that made Reginald talk to me in that wild way. Why will you not forgive him, and——'

'Winifrid,' interrupted Laura gravely, 'that is not possible. It is not a question of forgiveness. It is not his fancy, his passion for you, that I have to forgive; I do not think he could help it; it is his having made the fatal mistake of asking me to be his wife, that puzzles and angers me. He never loved me, *that* I know now thoroughly, bitterly! Reginald and I have parted for ever. Not that I shall have any bitterness against him, only an odd, vague distrust; and I know he will separate us hereafter, for you will yet be his wife.'

'Oh! no—no—no! He will not seek me. He will be ashamed. I could not bear——'

'Winifrid, you *love* Reginald! And you will be wax in his hands. Let us never speak of him again!'

The awkward silence which ensued was broken by a tap at the door, followed by the appearance of Collins with a letter.

'It is from Reginald,' said Laura, turning a shade paler. 'Stay, Winnie, I shall show you this letter when I have read it—unless, indeed, Reginald desires me not.'

Winnie stopped, her hands clasped before her, a look of positive pain on her face.

After glancing over the pages, Laura offered the letter to her cousin.

'In obedience to your strongly-expressed wish, I have abstained from trying to see you ; but in justice to myself I must once more offer a word of remonstrance. Your remarkable sense, which I have always admired, must tell you that a man who is willing and anxious to fulfil his original engagement, in spite of a sudden and powerful counter-attraction, is not to be lightly cast aside. I feel sure that Winifrid would entirely approve what I say, for, like myself, she must deplore a *contretemps* so fatal to our happiness. Believing, as I do, that under present circumstances it is better we should not meet, I am about to quit England for the Mediterranean, and shall probably visit Egypt. Meantime, hoping it may make matters easier for you, I shall write to Admiral Desbarres, stating that we have had a quarrel on the subject of my mother's consent to our marriage, and as it is now indefinitely deferred, I think it better to absent myself for a while. Do not answer this at once ; think over it well before you finally break with me, for no one is more truly or warmly attached to you than, yours still,

REGINALD PIERS.

'Address to the care of Messrs. Freshfield and Green.'

A silence of some moments followed when Winifrid returned this epistle to its owner ; at length she said, in an interrogative tone, 'Well ?'

'Well,' said Laura, with a sad smile, 'it's a curious letter. I am thankful that Reginald promises to write to the Admiral ; much explanation will thus be saved. I will certainly comply with his wish not to answer at once, in order to make that answer final.'

It was the evening but one after this conversation ; tea was ready and the lamp lit, while Mrs. Crewe and Laura awaited the return of Denzil and Winnie, who were both out.

'Dear me !' said Mrs. Crewe at length, 'it is half-past six, and no sign of your cousin. Is it not something new, her running about by herself ? Have you any idea where she goes ?'

'I hardly know ; she is trying for an engagement through the Governesses' Institution.'

'Good gracious! Is that with the Admiral's consent?'

'I do not know if he would consent or not; but neither she nor I ought to live on the Admiral.'

'My dear, I have a sort of idea that things are not going right; it is more than ten days since Mr. Piers was here, and no bouquets nor fruit coming. Ah, Laura! it is easier to throw away than to pick up.'

'Well, Mrs. Crewe, I confess we have had a difference of opinion, and now we have agreed that it is better not to meet for a while.'

'My dear!' said Mrs. Crewe oracularly, 'you have done for yourself. Young men do not like being trifled with, and when they have fortune and position they will not stand it.'

'Perhaps not; still I have to think of my own happiness and my own life; have patience with me, and bear with me. I am trying to do my best under difficulties!'

Laura's tact told her this was her safest line, that her good hostess's warm feelings made the best shield against her strong curiosity.

'Indeed I will, my love,' she exclaimed. 'You are always wise and prudent, but it would be a relief to your mind to confide in me, and my experience might—there is the door-bell,' interrupting herself and hastening to admit the applicant; 'perhaps it is Winnie.'

She was right, and returned to the room followed by the truant.

'Come, give an account of yourself. Are you wet, my dear? Really, Winnie, it is not prudent to stay out so late all by yourself.'

'I am not wet, Mrs. Crewe, and I have not been alone. I went to Mrs. Trent this afternoon, and she very kindly came with me to the Governesses' Institution.'

It was an effort of supreme courage, of profoundest penitence, this determination to go forth into the strange terrible world alone, on the part of a creature so clinging, so loving, so distrustful of herself as Winnie was in those early inexperienced days, and she longed unspeakably for a word of encouragement, of sympathy, from her auditors.

'Well,' returned Mrs. Crewe, 'why you cannot be satisfied to stay where Providence and the Admiral have placed

you, I do not understand. Independence is all very well, but really you are not called upon——'

'Ah! dear Mrs. Crewe,' interrupted Winnie, coming suddenly behind her chair and leaning on her shoulder till her fair young cheek touched the somewhat hollow one of her kind hostess, 'you do not know how awful the idea of going among strangers is to me, and yet I feel, I know, I must not stay here. I am not clever like Laura; still, I can, I ought to support myself. You are not angry with me?—I cannot bear you to be angry.'

'I am sure——' began Mrs. Crewe, still displeased, when the door opened to admit Denzil, who stopped abruptly, surprised at the tableau before him.

Winifrid withdrew her arm from Mrs. Crewe's shoulder in blushing confusion, saying, 'I was just coaxing Mrs. Crewe not to scold me.'

'What sins have you been committing?' said Denzil, with a rather forced smile.

'Here is this restless, foolish girl wanting to rush off on some wild-goose chase to earn her own living!' returned his mother. 'She calls it independence. I call it craving for excitement. Do you not think it is her duty to live on here quietly with me?'

'I have no right to give any opinion on Miss Fielden's affairs,' said Denzil, looking straight into the fire.

'That is a cold, unkind way of speaking,' cried Winnie, coming over to stand by the chimney-piece. 'Why should I not try to be independent, however humbly? I am sure your sympathies are with me!'

'They are!' said Denzil, with sudden warmth; 'they are with you in every way! I wish you had wealth and every good gift of fortune, but as you have not,—why, there is neither shame nor sorrow in honest work. If you must go forth from this quiet nook, I can but wish you God-speed.'

'I protest, Denzil, I did not expect this from you,' cried his mother. 'You young people are quite beyond my comprehension. Go, take off your things, my dear; I shall not trouble you with any more advice.'

Denzil's speech struck Laura as peculiar; she too anticipated a warm remonstrance on his part against Winnie's project, and it seemed to her that his few words indicated a

deliberate renunciation of any hopes he might have formed. Did he see below the surface more than others?

'Do not think that my heart does not ache for you, Winnie,' she exclaimed, when they were alone. 'It is a tremendous undertaking for you, dear; but every one likes you, and your banishment will not be for long; then, when time has softened everything, we will be friends again. May God speed you, as Denzil said.'

A timid embrace was Winnie's only reply.

A week after this conversation Denzil was unusually late. He had been much engaged with the fitting up of a new ship of which he was to take the command. On this evening Laura and Winnie had retired early to their own rooms, and Mrs. Crewe enjoyed herself preparing for her adored son. When the front-door bell announced the expected guest, Mrs. Crewe hastened to open it.

'Come in, dear! How wet you are! Just pull off your boots in the hall. I will bring you your slippers; they are nice and warm.'

Uttering all this very volubly, Mrs. Crewe led the way into the dining-room. She continued: 'I had a few lines from the Admiral to-day, with a cheque. The punctuality of that dear good man is amazing! I am afraid Miss Desbarres is in a bad way; her weakness is terrible. The Admiral does not know when he can leave her. I am sure her illness is a real misfortune. If her guardian had been in town and about, Laura would never have quarrelled in this extraordinary way with Mr. Piers. It is all in consequence of Laura's absurd pride, because Mrs. Piers would not welcome her as if she were an heiress. My young lady will not give in an inch, and now she has lost him, mark my words.'

'I daresay she has,' said Denzil, with annoying serenity.

'Then there is Winnie; I believe she has heard of an engagement. I must say this annoys me almost more than Laura's folly.'

'Yet her wish to maintain herself is right and natural.'

'I did not think *you* would like her to go and battle with the world; a handsome, elegant creature like her ought to be taken care of.'

'I would much prefer maintaining her myself,' returned Denzil, smiling; 'but I think the better of her for her self-respect.'

'Ah! my dear boy! then you are a little smitten with my sweet young friend?'

'Yes, very much,' said Denzil, with a sigh, 'or rather, I was; she is a woman any man might be a little mad about. But go on, mother; what else have you to complain of?'

'Oh! the only thing I object to is their want of trust in me. Though they try to keep a fair face, I can see quite well that there is *something* between Laura and Winnie. They are less together than they were, and I must say Laura is the most stand-off of the two. Between you and me, I think Laura has given young Piers up, for she let out the other day that she had been to see that drawing-man Mrs. Trent recommended long ago. I suspect the Admiral will be very vexed with them when he comes to know everything.'

Denzil made no reply, but sat for some minutes with his pipe in his hand, thinking too profoundly even to smoke.

'What are you thinking of, Denzil?' said his mother at last.

'I am piecing the puzzle together,' he returned, with a short sigh.

'Do you think you have made it out?' she asked eagerly.

'I am not sure enough to commit myself,' he said, resuming his pipe, and puffing leisurely; 'time will show. There is a wonderfully sad look about both of them; and if I am not greatly mistaken, Laura is a grand woman.'

'What! are you changeable like the rest? Are you turning to Laura? Are you going to be faithless to Winifrid?'

'It is of little consequence,' he said, gazing at the fire, and speaking as if to himself. 'That bit of folly is over; but she is a sweet creature—God bless her, and help her too!'

'Well, you are all most contradictory,' replied Mrs. Crewe, in a querulous tone; 'and I must say the one I have always found most reasonable and sympathetic is Mr. Piers, and how Laura can play fast and loose with him I cannot make out.'

CHAPTER XXI.

As the day fixed by Reginald for his departure drew near, his feverish desire to see and speak with Winnie increased. To a certain point he was cool, foreseeing, and prudent, but to leave London without coming to some understanding with the object of his first strong passion was too much for his self-control. But how to obtain one? To write and ask her to meet him was to destroy his chance; to linger about Leamington Road, in hopes of surprising her coming out or going in, was to risk awful encounters with Mrs. Crewe, or awkward meetings with Laura. In this difficulty he sought Mrs. Trent, divining in some odd, instinctive way that through her only he could get a clue. And yet he dared not ask a direct question. That astute lady was therefore rather puzzled by the sudden renewal of Reginald's old habits of intimacy, his early visits and droppings in to luncheon.

'I suppose, as he has quarrelled with his *fiancée*, he comes to me to be comforted,' was her reflection. 'What a fool that Laura Piers must be! I wish he would take a fancy to Katie; but it is not likely.'

So Mrs. Trent meditated as her neat brougham drew up sharply at Howell and James's, and the door was opened by the object of her thoughts.

'Ah, Reginald! shopping, like myself?'

'Yes; there are always last things to get before a start.'

'And when *do* you start?'

'The day after to-morrow, if nothing prevents me.'

'What a comprehensive "if"!' returned Mrs. Trent, smiling. 'Come in with me; I have only to leave a pattern of silk for poor old Lady Jamieson. She fancies they will not attend to her if she writes. I will put you down anywhere you like, after.'

Mrs. Trent's business was quickly despatched. So soon as they were shut into the carriage and the order given 'To Shoolbreds,' she observed:

'I suppose you know nothing about Laura and Miss Fielden now? Winnie is quite determined to accept a governess's situation. I cannot think what the Admiral will say when he knows. He is too much absorbed in his poor sister to attend to anything just now. I helped Winnie so far as I could by giving her a letter of introduction to the Governesses' Institution. I have just left her in Harley Street.'

'Indeed! I am sure the Admiral will be annoyed. What is this Institution you are talking of—where is it?'

'A very good place to find what one wants on either side.'

'What a shame it was of old Fielden to leave his children unprovided for!' said Reginald indignantly; then, looking at his watch, he exclaimed hastily, 'By Jove! it is later than I thought! I have an appointment at 2.30. Excuse me, Mrs. Trent, if I leave you abruptly; I will call this evening to make my adieux.'

He pulled the check-string, opened the door, and vanished so rapidly that Mrs. Trent was quite startled. Reginald, meantime, had speedily found a cab, and drove as fast as he could to Harley Street, where he proceeded to patrol the *pavé* at a little distance. He kept a long and weary watch, rendered doubly irksome by the fear that he might have missed his quarry; and he was almost inclined to retreat hopelessly, when a figure appeared descending the steps, at sight of which his heart leaped with a sudden bound—a tall slight figure in mourning; the step with which this girl walked leisurely towards Regent's Park was smooth and elastic, and completed her air of distinction. Reginald followed her, keeping a little behind until she neared York Gate, when, quickening his pace, he was soon beside her.

'Winnie!'

She started, and, turning very pale, looked at him with an expression almost of terror, glancing right and left, as if for some means of escape.

'Winnie!' repeated Reginald. 'Good heavens! you are not afraid of me? I must speak to you; I have watched and waited for this opportunity. There are some things of importance to Laura I want to ask you about,

and I am on the eve of quitting England for a long time.'

'I would much rather not. We ought never to meet any more,' said Winnie brokenly, with a slight despairing gesture of the hand. 'If you knew the misery and shame I have endured, the horror of myself—oh, Reginald, do not ask me to talk with you !'

'But I do,' he returned resolutely. 'It will be months, perhaps years, before we meet again, and you must hear what I have to say. Do you think, Winnie, that I have not suffered too ? Come with me into the park ; we can speak quietly there. If you refuse, I will follow you to Leamington Road and ask for an interview before Laura's face.'

Something in his resolute air, something also in the habitual charm he exercised over her, bent Winifrid's will to his. He was going away, too, and suffering through her ! She did not reply, but let him walk beside her, directing their steps into a quiet alley of the park. After proceeding for some time in silence, Reginald broke out :

'I have had you before my eyes night and day since that infernal accident betrayed us. I have eaten my heart out trying to find the means of seeing you, and now I scarcely know where to begin. How has it been with you since ? Has she been cruel ? Is she driving you away among strangers ? If so—if she makes your life wretched—let us cast all colder considerations to the winds, and go away together ; trust yourself to me, and let us secure some few days of heaven to look back upon, come what may after.'

Reginald spoke with fire ; excited by the unexpected joy of meeting, and intoxicated by the subtle charm of mingled tenderness and fear which pervaded her voice and manner, the quivering lip, the suddenly-averted glances of those grave sweet eyes, he was carried out of himself. 'Winnie, look at me ; will you come ?' he repeated.

His impassioned tone seemed to startle her into self-command. She turned her eyes full upon him, gravely, sadly.

'You know this is utter folly,' she said. 'You and I have no more to do with each other. Oh ! how I wish I

had battled on with my aunt rather than have brought sorrow and bitterness to those I love ! I am indeed unfortunate !'

'It is no fault of yours that you are lovely and lovable,' said Reginald, in a low tone. 'But tell me, how is it between Laura and yourself?—what does she think of me?'

'I believe Laura pities us both; but we never name you. Laura is always just—she is always kind; but she is very still and cold and silent to me. She does not drive me away, but it is impossible—do you not see it is quite impossible?—I can live among—upon people whose hopes and wishes I have been the means of frustrating! Oh, Reginald! why do you not strive to induce her to renew her engagement with you? It is the only means of extricating us all from this misery.'

'You ask too much,' returned Reginald. 'Besides, Laura would never listen to such a proposition; she is too clear-sighted—'

'Yes, but she loved you,' cried Winifrid, in her turn excited; 'and if you persevered—really—not going away out of sight, but persisting in seeing her, and telling her day after day that a moment's madness does not destroy real affection, she would listen and believe—she could not help it.'

'I cannot do this, Winnie,' he said, gazing fixedly into the eyes upturned to him. 'I confess that I was hasty and ill-judging in mistaking my own feelings towards Laura, and I was doubly unfortunate in not having met you till too late. But if, on my return to England, Laura still refuses me, am I to wear the willow for ever? And you, my love, my life! you will not sacrifice us both to an ideal myth of honour and fidelity—for you are not indifferent to me, Winnie? You would not wish to punish me for the crime of loving you too well? Look at me once more, Winnie, and say, if you *can* truly, "I do not love you!"'

'I hardly think I do, Reginald! I am so unhappy,' returned Winnie, the soft rich colour mantling in her check. 'And, oh! I wish you had never cared for me; but, indeed, it is too cruel to be the cause of grief to every one. And now I cannot stay any longer; I must leave you.'

'Not yet!' cried Reginald eagerly. 'We have settled

nothing—come to no understanding. Do not let me go without some knowledge of your movements, some clue to where I shall find you. Promise me, that should you be in any difficulty, any trouble, you will write to me.'

'No, no, no!' exclaimed Winnie. 'I will not write to you or receive a letter from you; it would be too, too base. I am not angry with you—how could I be?—but I must not, will not be so false to my dearest, best friend as to link myself with you. We are most unfortunate; that is all I can say. How poor and cold it sounds!'

Her voice broke suddenly, and, instead of turning to leave him, she sat down on a seat by which they were passing, and covered her face with her hands.

'And yet you can look calmly forward to an indefinite number of months, without the smallest chance of communicating with me!' said Reginald, placing himself beside her, and drawing away her hands, which he clasped in his own. 'Is that kind, or even just? Winnie! will you not write to me?'

'Only on one topic, Reginald,' she said resolutely. 'If I see any sign of softening in Laura, I will let you know; and then you will come back, will you not, and make up for all the bitter sorrow you and I have caused her?'

There was a tone of agonised entreaty in her voice; it moved Reginald strangely.

'I can promise nothing,' he said, after a moment's pause. 'I feel as if I were helplessly drifting on the stream of events; but, if you give me hope, I may yet be floated into the haven I long for.'

'Ah! no; there is no hope with me—none, Reginald. You only distress me—you only vex yourself. I cannot listen any more, and you must not come with me,' she added, with an air of decision so marked that he felt there was no appeal.

'One word before you leave me,' he cried. 'Shall you mention our interview to Laura?'

'I think not; we never mention you. We speak so little now. Good-bye. God bless you and direct you.'

'God! how hard it is to say good-bye! Yet, darling, I wish I had never seen you. It is good-bye, then?'

Winifrid drew her hand forcibly from him, and with a

slight sad gesture turned away and walked quickly out of sight. Reginald stood quite still for several seconds, looking after her, his face contracted with anger and fruitless regret; his heart agitated by the one gleam of hope that served to show more clearly the baffled schemes and almost hopeless passion which tormented him. At length he raised his head, his mouth tightened somewhat, and he too walked rapidly away in an opposite direction.

Next morning Laura was writing to the Admiral in her own room when Winnie tapped at the door.

When she entered Laura saw that she was very pale, and her large eyes dilated with a pained expression. She held an open letter in her hand.

'Oh, Laura,' cried Winnie, venturing to throw her arms round her as of old, 'do counsel me and think for me as you used. I have the letter I expected from the lady in the country, and who do you think it is?'

'How can I tell?' asked Laura uneasily.

'Lady Jervois!' cried Winnie. 'Ought I to go to her? Read her letter, and tell me what you think.'

'DEAR MISS FIELDEN,

'Somewhat to my surprise, I have received your address from the Governesses' Institution, and lose no time in telling you how pleased I should be if I could secure your care and instruction for my little girl. She is a quiet child, but I fear backward for her age. I must, however, warn you that, owing to my husband's somewhat peculiar views of female education, I cannot offer you an adequate salary—forty pounds a year being the utmost Sir Gilbert will agree to give. I may add that we lead a most retired and quiet life, in a remote district, and see scarce any society. I need hardly say that I should consider you a member of the family, and esteem myself fortunate in having your companionship. My kind regards to Miss Piers. Is it really true that my brother is going to winter in the South of Europe? I have not heard from him for an age. Hoping to have a speedy and affirmative reply, I am, dear Miss Fielden, yours very sincerely,

'HELEN JERVOIS.'

When Laura had finished the letter she remained a moment or two silent.

'Well, Laura, what do you think?' said Winnie, unable to restrain her impatience.

'It is very curious,' returned Laura slowly. 'What do you think yourself?'

'I do not know what to think,' cried Winnie. 'As to Lady Jervois herself, I should very much like to be with her, she is so gentle and nice. But, Laura, I don't think I ought to go. I think it would look like putting myself in the way of—I cannot speak all my thoughts—but you understand.'

'I do quite understand,' replied Laura calmly. 'I know you would naturally, *at present*, avoid Reginald; not that it will matter much in the end. Well, he will be out of the way for some months, that is certain; and when he returns, Winnie, he will seek you wherever you are, or I am much mistaken.'

'No—no. It will be no use, if he does.'

'Then,' resumed Laura, not heeding the interruption, 'the Admiral would be greatly reconciled to the idea of your earning your own living if he knew you were in the house of a friend, and almost a connection; and I'—her voice trembled—'I should be greatly comforted to know you had found something like a home.'

She stopped abruptly, and Winnie seized her hand. 'How good you are to me, Laura! Ah! how good!'

'Winnie!' exclaimed Laura; and then they hugged each other heartily for the first time since they knew they were rivals; 'I know, too, my dear uncle would be satisfied, could he see us, that you would be safe and well with Lady Jervois; I believe, Winnie, you had better accept.'

'I am half afraid, half anxious, to go—I will not write till to-morrow.'

'Yes, it is well to reflect.'

'If she were not *his* sister!' said Winnie, with averted face. 'But he may not hear—he may not know for a long time; and even then—'

'It is of little importance,' returned Laura, with a slight, unconscious sigh. 'I would advise you to write

to the Admiral as soon as you have made up your mind.'

Laura's counsels and her own inclination decided Winnie. A voice seemed to sound perpetually in her ears—an echo in her heart. 'Go forth!' it said, 'go forth! Be no longer a burden to those whom you have injured and betrayed; and impelled by this imperative command, anxious to escape the constant reproach of Laura's presence, she rushed into action.

So the ensuing ten days were big with events. Mrs. Crewe was almost reconciled to the idea of Winifrid Fielden 'going out,' when the scene of her labours was to be the family of a baronet of ancient lineage, and if not a connection, the next thing to it.

The Admiral wrote shortly, but kindly, that he had no objection to his dear young friend trying her wings with so short a flight, especially as her eldest brother approved. Winnie therefore closed with Lady Jervois, made her simple preparations, and, escorted to the station by Laura and Mrs. Crewe, who bestowed on her a huge embrace, a big luncheon-basket, and a blessing, started in search of independence and the consolation of work. Two days after, the 'society papers' announced the departure of Mr. Piers of Pierslynn, and a distinguished party, on board Lord Dereham's yacht for the Mediterranean.

This first break-up of the happy little party in Leamington Road was quickly followed by the adieux of Denzil, who had been a shade graver and more silent of late. Laura was surprised how much she missed him. With all his quiet unobtrusiveness, there was a tacit sympathy between them of which she was half unconscious until she lost it. Finally, this period of severance was brought to a close by a telegram from the Admiral :

'My sister was unexpectedly called hence yesterday. She expired a little before midnight.'

CHAPTER XXII.

LAURA's dreaded explanation with the Admiral had been shorn of half its terrors by the old man's grief for his sister. She saw little of him for some months after her death ; for, having been recommended to try change of scene and air, he decided on visiting Piedmont, where he had heard a very remarkable work of evangelisation was going on.

So Mrs. Crewe and her dear 'young friend' settled down to the quiet routine of their winter days ; and the current of Laura's experience flowed on slowly, tranquilly, as it were between dull sedgy banks, instead of the foliage and flowers that had beautified it a few short months ago. Yet through the dim gray mist of this dreary time she perceived that her strength was coming back to her, and that her faith in the inexhaustible riches of life was reviving:

To Winifrid Fielden the months that intervened between her last agitating interview with Reginald and the first spring days were less painful and monotonous than she had anticipated. With Lady Jervois she soon felt at home. There was something almost pathetic in the gentle resignation of her aspect and her life.

Her one link with life was her daughter, whom she loved with a painful, half-distrustful love, while her child, by some subtle mental or moral chemistry, had assimilated something of her father's obstinate purpose in the form of firmness with her mother's soft tenderness, and loved that mother with deep, watchful, protecting affection. Her father had never forgiven her for being a girl. Not that he had any of that love of name and race which, in spite of its selfishness, is not without a strain of nobility, and which makes a man pine for a son, an heir sprung from himself to stand in his place and occupy the home he has dignified and adorned ; but he had a sound, hearty hatred of the man who would come after him.

Into this silent, sombre household Winnie Fielden came, not like a sunbeam—she was too cast-down and sad herself for such a simile—but like a breath of fresh fragrant air, bringing with it a perfume as of grass and blossom lately bathed in summer showers. Winnie, who was quick and observant enough, soon saw that her society was even of greater value to the mother than to the daughter. Lady Jervois quite revived in congenial companionship. The long vacant days became gradually filled up; Winnie induced her to try duets, and found that Lady Jervois had been well and thoroughly taught; but music, like everything else, had ceased to interest in the dead monotony of utter loneliness. Then Lady Jervois was tempted to take up German again, and in the first flush of his contentment with the new member of his family Sir Gilbert permitted her to coax him into the extravagance of a subscription to Mudie's. Meantime Laura's letters grew longer, fuller, warmer, and Winifrid felt a degree of rest, and even satisfaction, beyond what she had dared to hope.

Like all reasonable persons oppressed with a grief or a longing that ought not to be, and must not be, indulged, Winnie sought relief in occupation, nor did she show much outward sign of sadness or mental conflict. Had Lady Jervois known Winnie in her unclouded days, she would have recognised a change in the bright girl so instinct with life and joy and hope; as it was, she seemed cheerful enough in the dull surroundings of Ashley Grange.

Sir Gilbert Jervois managed to live his life wonderfully apart from those under the same roof with him. He generally got up at cock-crow, and had a ramble of inspection round the home premises before breakfast, and had mounted his shooting-pony either to visit some distant preserves, or examine into some farming operations, if he had not retired to his study or justice-room to write letters, before the ladies had left their rooms. He was always too early for dinner, and the ladies had the habit of making the midday meal of tea with her pupil at the late dinner-hour, but Winnie had proposed the usual

'Pray come to dinner with us, Miss Fielden,' said Lady Jervois; 'ours is such a very homely establishment, and Sybil is so accustomed to come in before dinner is half over, that if you stay away we shall only lose you both.'

'Hang it, no!' cried Sir Gilbert, with a complimentary grin. 'Hang it, no! It's not every day we catch a handsome girl to light up our Darby-and-Joan repast, and, by George, you mustn't leave my lady and me to our matrimonial *tête-à-tête*—it isn't the liveliest concern, *I* can tell you!'

So Winifrid soon came to be one of the family, to its decided advantage.

The only place in which Lady Jervois saw anything of 'The County' was at church. Sir Gilbert was more unpopular with his equals than with his inferiors, and his wife had grown morbid in her avoidance of society, and would shrink and change colour if in their walks any of their neighbours encountered herself and Winifrid or Sybil.

One of the more daring and experienced of the rare visitors at Ashley Grange, the eldest son of a wealthy squire, home for the hunting season on leave from his regiment, absolutely contrived on one occasion to interest Lady Jervois and draw her into conversation, while he walked for more than a mile, his horse's bridle over his arm, beside her and her fair companion, who gave him a flattering amount of attention; for the subject of his conversation was his acquaintance with 'your brother, Lady Jervois, whom I had the pleasure of meeting at Lord Dereham's last autumn. It was a very jolly party, and after some of the bores had gone (there must be a few bores in every party, you know), we all went over to Pierslynn, a charming old place, and delightfully comfortable. We had capital sport, and great fun. Lord Dereham's niece, Madame Moscynska, a first-rate woman, up to everything, did hostess; you can't think how jolly it all was. Piers himself is a capital fellow. Have you heard of him lately?'

'I had a few lines from Cairo,' said Lady Jervois, with a little more animation than usual. 'The yachting expedition seemed to be breaking up; only himself and a Mr. Everest—an artist, I think—remained with Lord Dereham. They intended going as far as the Second Cataract. I

think he mentions this lady ; he calls her Princess Moscynska.'

'Just so,' put in her companion ; 'she is a Polish princess.'

'She joined them at Cannes or Nice, and went as far as Fiume, I believe.'

'I daresay. She is great friends with a lot of Austrian swells, and talked of visiting Graf something or other this winter. She is a deuced keen politician, up to every move on the European chessboard. You must have met her in town last season, Lady Jervois. She was a great deal with the Marchioness of Harborough and that set.'

'I was in town, certainly, last spring,' returned Lady Jervois, smiling, 'but I saw nothing of the season.'

To this conversation Winifrid listened with intense, painful interest. Who was this fascinating personage who had appeared upon the scene ? Though she honestly prayed that he might be reconciled to Laura, she could not give him up to another. But had she any choice ?—here she became aware that Lady Jervois was speaking to her.

'I do not think Reginald cares much for politics, eh, Winifrid ?' (She had been Winifrid and Winnie for a considerable time both with mother and daughter.)

Young Dacres listened with devout attention for her reply, and noted the quick sweet blush with which she answered :

'Oh yes ! I think he cares a good deal for politics. I cannot fancy an Englishman not caring for politics. It is quite different with Frenchmen or Germans.'

'Miss Fielden, you see, is prepared to follow in the steps of your charming Princess,' said Lady Jervois, for the sake of saying something ; but their companion chose to take it as an introduction, and lifted his hat with profound respect.

'Perhaps when Miss Fielden is as old as the Princess Moscynska she may be as keen a politician ; but I doubt it,' he returned, smiling.

This speech brought them to the park gates, where Lady Jervois made a decided stand, and there was nothing left for her cavalier but to wish her good-morning and ride away. Reaching the causeway by which the road crossed

to the house, Lady Jervois turned down a short steep path leading to this sunken shrubbery.

'Go on, Sybil dear,' she said; 'look for some crocuses and violets; we have often found them here weeks before they appear elsewhere; try and find enough for a bouquet for Winifrid.'

Sybil started at a run, and was soon out of sight.

'I have often wanted to ask you about your cousin and Reginald,' began Lady Jervois, a slight hesitation perceptible in her composed well-bred voice, 'but have scarcely liked to touch so delicate a subject. This conversation with young Dacres just now has suggested a reason for the coolness that has evidently come between my brother and his *fiancée*. He has been very reticent about it, but we have not met since I was in town, and so little can be written. Do you think that this Madame Moscynska had anything to do with the present state of things? Had Miss Piers any reason to think Reginald faithless?'

At this home question Winifrid turned first hot and then cold; she was quite unprepared for such a thrust; fortunately Lady Jervois, not too deeply interested in her answer, was looking after Sybil and not at her, and with a resolute exertion of self-control Winnie was able to reply:

'I am afraid Laura had reason to doubt him, but perhaps they may make friends again: I wish they would—they were both so unhappy.'

'I do not think they will,' said Lady Jervois thoughtfully; 'for, though I can hardly account for the impression, he never gave me the idea of being *in love* with her.'

'Indeed! why?' exclaimed Winifrid, her heart beating painfully.

'I say I cannot account for the impression,' repeated Lady Jervois, smiling, 'but I have it, nevertheless; yet when I saw him last he was all eagerness to be married. I confess, my dear Winifrid, I am rather glad things are as they are; I always doubted if a marriage with your cousin would be very happy for either party—not that I mean to disparage Miss Piers; but Reginald ought to marry a woman of the world—not that I am at all disposed to fancy this Polish princess—and Lord Dereham, too, has not the highest reputation for steadiness. However,

I have always believed Reginald quite able to take care of himself, and I am sure it would be better for him not to make what is called a love-match, it is so often a mistake,' and Lady Jervois sighed.

Winifrid listened with deep attention to this speech, an unusually long one for her companion. It gave her time to calm and collect herself, so she answered quietly :

'I am sure if he had sought through the world he could not find a better wife than Laura would be. You do not know how good and clever she is. It seems to me that she is a woman of the world too, she is so wise and calm. Reginald was always fond of her ; I remember when I was quite a little thing his first question when he came into the house always was, "Where is Laura ?"

'When did you hear last from Miss Piers ?' asked Lady Jervois.

'Not for more than a fortnight. I have been wondering at her silence.'

'Did she mention my brother ?'

'No, she never does ; she said something about the Admiral having met with a great loss—loss of money, I mean. She says she will tell me more when she has seen him. But the Admiral only cares for money to give it away.'

'Well, if he has it not even to give away, it is a terrible loss—at least, to him. I too begin to wonder when I shall hear from Reginald ; his last letter from Cairo is quite two months old ; my mother begins to be uneasy about him.'

The next morning's post brought Winnie two letters, one from Herbert, the other addressed in Laura's well-known writing. Winnie soon despatched the first, which was principally taken up by a request for three shillings, which his sister might 'send in postage-stamps, for I can sell them to the fellows here ;' she hardly glanced through Laura's before she exclaimed :

'Oh ! dear Lady Jervois, listen to this,' and then read : "'I have delayed so long writing to you because I could not send you a letter till I knew certainly what to tell about our dear good friend Admiral Desbarres. I fear he has lost everything. It seems that he had a great number

of shares in a company, and because they did not ask for the whole of the money at once he went on taking more, and now everything has failed, and the company has no funds, so the few shareholders are obliged to give up all they possess ; even the Admiral's house and furniture are taken, or will be, and he has nothing left but his half-pay. He was here yesterday, and though as calm and kind and dignified as ever, he looked ill. I cannot describe Mrs. Crewe's state of mind—her indignation against the “miscreants,” as she calls them, who have robbed my dear guardian—Mr. Trent, for having let him give his money to such wretches—and indeed every one. She has rearranged her house, and has made up her mind that the Admiral is to live here as her guest, or at all events at some very low rate of remuneration. We have had a great turn-out of the furniture in the two best rooms, and Mrs. Crewe has advertised for another inmate, “for,” she said to me last night, “some one *shall* pay the rent of my house for me, or nearly pay it.” I have of course given up my room, and we have made it so nice, with one of the best easy-chairs and a writing-table, etc., for I believe it is nearly settled that when the Admiral has given up his country-place he will come to us. Is it not fortunate that I had begun to look for something to do ? I have just succeeded, —thanks to Miss Trent's drawing-master—in finding an engagement, to teach the junior drawing-class in a large school near this—a Ladies' College they call it. This, with my designs for needlework, will be a help. How glad I am you are with Lady Jervois, and that she is so kind——’

Here Winnie broke off suddenly, while her listener observed :

‘ And Lady Jervois is very glad to have you. But this is bad news indeed, especially for your cousin Laura. Poor girl ! she is really very unfortunate ! ’

There was a pause. Winnie continued to read her letter; then, looking up suddenly with distressed eyes and pale cheeks, said :

‘ She is indeed,—and so am I. We have always felt each other's griefs—and I—oh ! I would give anything to help her—to comfort her ! ’

Here their conversation was interrupted by the entrance

of Sir Gilbert, who wanted some information respecting the conveyance of a parcel, as he often made use of Winnie's eyes and quick perception to hunt up fares, rates, and rules, through the intricacy of Bradshaw.

Then came the usual schoolroom duties, a long walk, and dinner ; so it was late in the evening before Winnie could escape to her own chamber to pour out her heart to Laura.

About a week after the receipt of this letter the weather changed, and the violets and crocuses which had ventured to put forth their venturesome heads were beaten to the earth by sudden short fierce showers of hail ; while vicious, bitter winds tore vehemently through the gorges and rifts of the hills, howled and moaned in the chimneys of the old house, and beat its rugged front with pitiless wrath.

The second and worst of these days, Sir Gilbert, moved by his inherent disregard of man and beast, determined that it was absolutely essential to return a visit made to Lady Jervois quite three months before by a distant neighbour.

Dinner was later than usual, as the master and mistress did not return till considerably past the time anticipated. Lady Jervois was chilled and tired, and Sir Gilbert soon settled himself for a sleep. Sybil had gone to bed.

'Play something soothing and sleepy,' said Lady Jervois to her young companion in the evening. 'I feel unequal to do anything but bask in the firelight and listen.'

How long Winnie had played, half unconscious of the present, she did not know ; at length an opening door, an exclamation from Lady Jervois, a sudden inarticulate growl from Sir Gilbert, startled her ; she rose, turned from the piano, and saw, standing on the hearthrug, his hand in his sister's, Reginald himself !

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE shock and the delight were almost too much for Winifrid's self-control. For a brief second a painful darkness seemed to quench her sight, a noise of rushing

waters in her ears dulled all other sound, and she instinctively clutched the back of a chair beside her. But the strange faintness soon passed away, and she heard Reginald's voice saying, 'You fancied I was in Egypt? Oh no, I have been a week in town, and thought of going down to Pierslynn, but on second thoughts I felt I ought to look you up—eh, Jervois? I have brought you some wonderful Turkish tobacco; it will make you dream of the Houris.' What made me so late? Oh, the bridge—just before you come into Aldingham—you know it—had been injured by the flood yesterday, and the train was obliged to stop at the other side. I had some difficulty in finding a trap, and the roads are in an awful state. I have been two hours and a half driving from the cross-roads at Thirlston.'

Sir Gilbert burst into exclamations against the weather, but without heeding him Reginald turned and walked across to where Winnie stood, pale and still, her simple black dress falling in straight folds to her feet. How rapidly his eyes took in every detail of her face and form, and rejoiced in the natural noble grace of her figure, the beauty of her half-averted face, the tremulous sweetness of her parted lips!

'Winnie!'—he said 'Winnie,' only her name—yet what rapture and passionate tenderness the word conveyed, and how expressive the pause that followed, while he took her hand in one of his, and then laid the other over it, all unnoticed by Sir Gilbert or Lady Jervois.

Winnie felt compelled to raise her eyes to his, and then felt her heart stand still with a strange terror, not unmixed with delight, at what she read there.

'So,' resumed Reginald, in a different and more guarded tone, as he let her hand go, 'I find you in a totally new character, Winnie. Why, I can fancy Sybil and yourself more a couple of playfellows than pupil and teacher. How have you contrived to tone yourself up or down to the solemnities of the schoolroom? I cannot imagine the wayward pet of the Rectory sufficiently *rangée* for your new rôle.'

'I have had a great deal to tone me down, you know, since those days,' replied Winnie in a low voice, which she

could not keep quite steady, and she moved forward to the fireplace to avoid the appearance of standing apart with Reginald. ‘I hope Lady Jervois feels satisfied with my system and discipline,’ she added, with a smile.

‘Your work seems to agree with you,’ said Reginald, still gazing intently at her. ‘Tell me, Winnie, how is —every one—’ the little pause conveyed much.

‘All are well in health,’ returned Winnie, colouring vividly, ‘but we are greatly troubled about the Admiral! He has lost a quantity of money—all he possesses, I believe—in some company.’

‘Gad, sir!’ cried Sir Gilbert, ‘he is a born idiot. His friends ought to put him under restraint! a man of that kind ought not to be left at large—setting such an example of—of—’

What was never ascertained, for the butler announced that supper awaited Mr. Piers in the dining-room.

Lady Jervois accompanied her brother, and Sir Gilbert resumed his arm-chair and the county paper.

Meantime Winnie stole noiselessly from the library, and ran quickly to her own room, locking the door with eager haste, as if she feared pursuit. Then she stood quite still in the firelight, her bosom heaving, her breath coming quickly, trying to think, yet unable to form distinct ideas, for the multitude of fancies, memories, anticipations that came crowding through her brain.

What should she do? What could she do? She ought to avoid Reginald if she would be faithful to her friend—she ought not to stay in the same house with him when his eyes told her so plainly why he had come. Ah! how foolish of her to fear that Polish woman! There was no unfaithfulness in Reggie; he was unfortunate, not wilfully faithless as regarded Laura. And the sound of his voice when he uttered her name came back to her as proof positive that he loved her as well as ever. No, it was useless to think of flight; she must no longer count on any help from the Admiral, even if she dared to say *why* she required it—which she dared not. No! she must stay where she was, and strive to avoid Reginald as much as possible; perhaps he would see and understand her inten-

tions—perhaps. Oh ! it was impossible to foresee how the current of events would set ; only she was thankful she had despatched a long letter to Laura only the day before yesterday, so for a few days she need not write—a blessed respite.

How heartily, how passionately, she prayed for guidance and help, and how, in spite of all anticipations of pain and trouble, her last waking thought was that she would meet Reginald at breakfast, and see his face and hear his voice ! Ah ! should she ever see the day when her intercourse with him would not be delight and misery commingled ?

But Reginald did not appear at breakfast. He was late, and Winifrid and her pupil were enabled to escape to the schoolroom before he came from his room ; for which Winnie told herself she was very glad.

Winifrid changed her dress as usual for dinner, but rigidly refrained from adding a frill, a bow, a flower, a morsel of lace to the very simple decorations she had worn for the last three or four days. She found the party assembled in Lady Jervois's morning-room—Sir Gilbert standing with his back to the fire playing with his daughter's long blonde plaits of hair.

'Oh, Winnie,' cried Sybil, 'Uncle Reggie has been telling me such a delightful story of a crocodile he shot near Thebes. You will let him come up to the schoolroom to-morrow, and show us all the places on the map ? He has seen so many wonderful things.'

Winifrid was saved the necessity of answering by the announcement of dinner. Lady Jervois took her brother's arm and led the way, followed by Sir Gilbert and Winnie. After the first quarter of an hour the conversation grew more animated, but Winnie felt quite unable to take any share in it ; the sense of her difficult position pressed heavily upon her, and the consciousness that Reginald's eyes constantly rested upon her, and were as constantly averted, completed her embarrassment.

'So you left Dereham and the yacht at Alexandria ! What route did you take returning ?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'I took the P. and O. steamer to Marseilles, and so on

to Paris. I had sundry parcels for a niece of Lord Dereham's who had been with us at first, and had returned to Paris.'

'Did you make any stay there?' asked Lady Jervois.

'About three weeks. It was rather amusing, and Madame Moscynska is a capital cicerone—she knows heaps of people of all nationalities.'

Winifrid's attention was almost painfully keen, and she listened eagerly to what followed, although it was commonplace enough. Lady Jervois attempted some leading questions touching Madame Moscynska which Reginald answered very scantily, and Winnie was a good deal impressed by the vague yet perceptible change in Reginald, of which, as she sat there watching and listening, she was distinctly conscious.

He seemed to be older, larger, darker than he was six months ago, with something bolder and harder in his expression, a tinge of careless *hauteur* in his bearing, when silent or thoughtful; but his smile was as sweet and his voice as pleasant as ever. He was kindly and courteous in his manner to Lady Jervois, and veiled his irrepressible contempt for her husband under an air of good-humoured banter. As the moments glided past a curious conviction grew upon Winnie that her old playmate lover was in some inexplicable way master of the situation, that without a word of explanation he was exercising a powerful influence over her—a foolish morbid fancy, as she told herself. It was a terrible ordeal, that long dinner. At last, at the end of a rambling sentence in which Sir Gilbert expounded his views respecting the folly of bothering about pyramids and inscriptions and the slave-trade, and all that sort of infernal nonsense, Lady Jervois looked at Winifrid and rose.

'Let us adopt foreign custom for once,' said Reginald, rising also, 'and accompany the ladies, if you have no objection, Jervois.'

'Oh, I don't mind,' said that courteous gentleman. 'I have said my say, and am good for an hour's snooze as soon as I have had a cup of tea.'

They accordingly adjourned to the library, where Sybil awaited them and tried to take possession of her uncle, but he was very silent.

'Do you never play now, Winnie?' he said at last. 'I have scarce heard any music since I saw you, except some very earsplitting compositions at the Grand New Paris Opera House.'

'Yes! play something,' said Lady Jervois, who seemed not quite at ease.

Winifrid readily complied. The employment was most welcome: the music soothed and strengthened her—it seemed to evoke a nobler spirit from the mist of doubt and fear which had oppressed her—so she played on and on, till Sybil stole to her side to kiss her and say good-night.

She started up.

'I had no idea it was so late! I did not think I had inflicted so much music upon you!' she exclaimed.

'You played with true inspiration,' said Reginald. 'I could listen all the evening.'

'Yes! she plays delightfully,' remarked his sister.

'Stay, Sybil, I will go with you,' said Winnie, laying her hand on her pupil's shoulder.

'So soon!' cried Lady Jervois; 'it is only nine o'clock!'

'If you will excuse me.'

Reginald rose and opened the door.

Returning to his seat, which he drew nearer to his sister, he said, 'Now, Nelly, for a long and confidential talk.'

The next morning rose bright, balmy, spring-like, as if to atone for the roughness and unseasonable rigour of the last few days. Reginald did not appear either at breakfast or the midday meal.

'Come, Sybil,' said Winifrid when they had regained the shelter of the schoolroom, 'try and do a very good half-hour's practice, and then we will go out; you can finish your time before dinner, as I think Sir Gilbert will be late.'

Here, then, Winnie sat dreaming over some needlework, and not, perhaps, attending as she ought to have done to Sybil's scales and exercises; she saw the master of the house ride away alone, and half wondered that Reginald had not accompanied him. Then her thoughts wandered to her future. It was very dark and unattractive; little remained to her save—

'Sybil, the mother wants you,' said a voice that sent the blood back to her heart and scattered her thoughts to the winds.

'But I have not quite finished my practising!' cried the little girl, starting up joyously.

'Oh, Miss Fielden will excuse you. Run off.'

And Sybil was gone.

'Does not Lady Jervois want me too?' said Winifrid, emerging from a window as Reginald closed the door, while she trembled in every limb.

'No, she does not! Ah! Winnie, I do not know how I have lived through yesterday—burning as I was to speak to you, to know how I stood with you! Look at me!—no, do not turn away. Why do you shrink back? You knew before how I loved you. You must have known I would come back for you as soon as I had worked out my term of banishment. And now, look at me! How often I have seen those eyes in my dreams by day and by night!'

He took her hand, and, kissing it fondly, drew her back to the sofa she had quitted.

'Reginald——' began Winifrid, and stopped, unable to put into words the thoughts which crowded upon her.

'Well!' he asked after an instant's silence, during which he gazed upon her eagerly. 'Have you no more to say than my name! Tell me, am I welcome? Do you love me?'

'Ah! Reginald, I do not know what to say, or what I ought to do. Oh yes, I am glad to see you—very, very glad; but I wish you had not come!'

'Wish I had not come! Why? You must have known I would come. You remember our last meeting?'

'I do remember it well; but, Reginald, that is nearly six months ago—and you have seen others—and as it would be wiser, and less hurtful, perhaps, to Laura, if you—if you married some one else, I thought you might—you might change, or think it wiser——' she broke off.

'I have seen others? What do you allude to?' asked Reginald, knitting his brows somewhat impatiently.

'I mean you have seen a great many people, and—Ah! Reggie dear, let my hand go; I do not seem able to think clearly while you hold it, and I want to speak frankly

and truly to you, as if you were a friend and nothing more.'

'But *am I* something more?' he asked in a low, entreating tone that thrilled Winnie's heart with a strange pain and delight. She covered her face with her hands.

'Oh, I wish you had never seen me!' she exclaimed. 'You would have been better and happier. Just think how I shall appear in Laura's eyes—if—if I listen to you! Think how you will probably reproach yourself later when, perhaps, you will think less about me; and even if you never make it up with Laura again, it would be less hurtful to her if you married some one else. Do you not see it yourself?'

Reginald listened intently, his eyes fastened upon the speaker, charmed by the candour, the unconscious tenderness, of her words and manner.

'My sweetest life!' he exclaimed, again possessing himself of her hand; 'you are cruel and illogical! The mischief as regards Laura is done—nothing can make it better or worse; and your insinuation that I may change towards you is a cruel reminder of what you are really responsible for. Now, hear me, Winifrid. I will never let you go—unless you can look in my eyes and say, "Reggie, I do *not* love you." I have risked everything for you—and you shall be my wife!' There was a tinge of fierceness in his speech that affected Winifrid strangely. She turned pale and faint and cold for an instant; she loved him well, but for that instant she would have gladly escaped out of his hands.

Her change of colour and expression struck Reginald.

'I am too rough, too vehement for you, darling!' he cried, softening his tone. 'But I have been so miserable, such an unlucky beggar, that you really must make up your mind to give me a little sunshine! It was, I confess, an awful blunder to mistake my feelings for Laura as I did; but I was quite willing to take the penalty. We were both betrayed by the most decided ill or good luck into our present position. Neither of us intended to be false to Laura, and *you* were true as steel. In compliance with what I knew was your wish, and what I myself thought was due to Laura, I wrote to her from Paris, offering to fulfil our engagement. Read her reply!'

He drew a letter from his breast-pocket, which he opened and handed to her.

With a sort of reluctance Winnie took it and read as follows :

'I have your letter of the 10th, dear Reginald. I did not reply at once, because I waited to reflect how I could best and most decidedly answer it.

'You must have felt, even while you wrote, that you were going through an empty form. You cannot believe that I could deliberately choose a course that would ensure your misery and my own. No ! I do sincerely thank God that I was enabled to know the truth before it was too late. Do not think that I write this with anger or bitterness. My only reproach to you is that you did not take time to understand your own feelings towards me. However, that is all over, and, so far as I am concerned, you are perfectly free—free to marry our dear sweet Winifrid if you can win her. And if you do, Reginald, be true and loving to her, as she deserves. I have no more to add. I confess I would rather not meet you now ; later on we may be good friends once more. I trust there are brighter, happier times before us both, for there is no reason why an unfortunate mistake, for which, probably, no one was really to blame, should entail perpetual sorrow and remorse.

—Always sincerely yours,

LAURA PIERS.'

'How like her,' cried Winnie, her eyes sparkling with sympathetic admiration. 'How noble she is in her quiet common sense ! I wonder you can bear to give her up !'

'She is a fine creature,' returned Reginald thoughtfully, 'and deserves a better fellow than I am. But there is no use in reasoning about it. She might be an angel, or the noblest of human beings, and yet unable "to strike the electric chain with which we're darkly bound"—this magic, Winnie, was given to you, and my whole being vibrates to your presence, your voice, your eyes ! Ah ! Winnie, why trifle any longer with me, and lose precious hours of heavenly happiness for overstrained scruples ?'

'But, Reginald,' she said in a low, almost awestruck voice, and trembling from head to foot as the overpowering

idea that union with Reginald was not only possible but imminent dawned upon her, ‘if you persist in this—this determination, what will Lady Jervois say?’

‘My sister already knows that nothing short of a resolute rejection on your part will prevent your being my wife, and even then’—a laugh contradicted the fire that lit his eyes as he spoke—‘I should feel tempted to try what a revival of the old half-savage plan of carrying you off might do.’

‘But your mother, Reggie dear! She objected to Laura: what will she say to me?’

‘She is prepared to receive you as a daughter; I have settled all that. You see, dearest, you possess the passport of beauty.’

‘Ah, how unjust it all is! Laura is worth much more than I am!’

‘Possibly,’ returned Reginald, smiling, ‘but not to *me*. Now, my own, my love, my life! I have disposed of every objection; you can have nothing to urge against our speedy marriage.’

Winnie rose suddenly from her seat, and walked a little way from him; then, turning, stood with clasped hands dropped before her.

‘I can scarcely believe it possible!’ she said, almost in a whisper; ‘how can it be? I am so alone—I cannot stay here—I have no home to go to.’

‘Come to mine!’ cried Reginald, starting to her side, and drawing her to him in a long tender embrace. ‘By heaven, I will make it a happy one to you. My sister is your friend, and you must only leave her house as my wife; your loneliness, the fact that my attachment to you has cut you off from your nearest friends, all demand an immediate marriage; within a month all preliminaries can be arranged, and we can leave the Grange as man and wife.’

‘Here! to be married here! Oh no!—dear, dear Reggie, that is quite impossible. And to be married without seeing Laura and the Admiral! It would indeed look like guilt. Do you not see it yourself?—think for me.’

‘I will; let us consult my sister. But, my own, my sweetest life, I have your promise, your full, free consent? You will be mine so soon as matters can be arranged?’

Trembling in every limb, too dazed by vivid light against a dark background to keep her judgment clear, Winnie yielded to her lover's caress, and, folded in his arms, sobbed against his breast.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE sudden and complete ruin which had overtaken the Admiral was probably the best tonic that could have been administered to Laura. It roused her and drew her completely out of herself. To be able to help and comfort her guardian, who was more than a father to her, because he had voluntarily undertaken a parent's part, was something to live for. She had a work, an especially congenial work, given to her, and she felt new energy and courage spring up at the unexpected demand for them.

The only other considerable shareholder besides the Admiral having any liabilities thought it wiser to 'go under' for a while, and disappeared from view. The Admiral, having invested nearly the whole of his available funds in the purchase of shares, only the half of which were called up, was liable for something little short of £9000—all that he possessed in the way of capital, his pretty little property near Tunbridge Wells, some small savings of income effected almost in spite of himself, all was swallowed up. Messrs. Thurston and Trent talked largely of proceeding against the directors and promoters, of unmasking nefarious transactions, and inflicting summary justice on a certain secretary absent without leave; but the Admiral would hear of nothing to this effect. When he had somewhat recovered the sort of stupefaction which at first dulled him, he said he had not been deceived in any way. He was aware the scheme had been in embryo. He had been informed that the company awaited the decision of the Hungarian Chamber, and if he was deceived he had deceived himself. He was mistaken, they all had been mistaken, and all must suffer; he was willing to take his share, and asked no more.

The news of the catastrophe spread like wildfire, and

brought Mrs. Trent to condole with Laura. She was too much engaged to see her young relative often, yet she never quite neglected her, and her present visit was paid with the object of ascertaining if she could in any way assist Laura in obtaining employment or pupils; 'for,' she said, 'I fear the Admiral's power of helping you will be sadly crippled. Have you seen him since his return?'

'No!' replied Laura. 'He wrote to tell me he was in town, but too much engaged to come here for a few days; adding that he had met with severe losses.'

'I do not imagine they would affect him, but for the necessity of holding back his bounteous hand; many will feel them more than himself.'

'Quite true, my dear Mrs. Trent,' said Mrs. Crewe, who caught the last words as she came into the room, 'and I earnestly hope the wretches who have robbed and plundered our dear friend may be brought to justice.'

'So do I,' replied Mrs. Trent. 'But I fear there is little prospect of punishing them.'

'It seems to me,' cried Mrs. Crewe, 'that the law is framed for the express purpose of sheltering evildoers.'

'You must not let Mr. Trent hear you say so,' said his wife, laughing, 'but I am sometimes inclined to think so myself; however, I have just been discussing with Laura what is to be done, as our good friend's means will now be so limited that her very charming talent for painting may prove most useful.'

'I have always wished to help myself,' returned Laura simply. 'Yesterday I ventured to take one or two of my smaller sketches, and showed them to the head of the establishment for which I have worked. He seemed pleased with them, and asked me if I cared to copy, as there were two or three pictures in the South Kensington Museum of which he would like copies. Of course I said I should be glad to try.'

'This might turn out very pleasant and profitable,' cried Mrs. Trent; 'we must find out what price you ought to ask.'

'As a mere beginner, I had better leave the price to my employer,' said Laura.

'That is always her way,' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe—'always undervaluing herself.'

'Which will never do, Laura, if you intend to enter the labour market!' said Mrs. Trent pleasantly. 'Now, as we are all friends and talking confidentially, let me ask with the sincerest interest what *has* become of Reginald Piers?'

'I am sure you do not ask from idle curiosity,' returned Laura, looking straight at the speaker, while Mrs. Crewe listened intently; 'and I am sure your kindness to me entitles you to an answer; but I can only say that, beyond having seen in the paper that he was one of the party in Lord Dereham's yacht, I know nothing.'

'Absolutely nothing,' echoed Mrs. Crewe despondently.

'Then—excuse me, dear, if I give you pain—but *is* it all over between you?' persisted Mrs. Trent.

'Quite over,' said Laura, with surprising firmness; 'our difference of opinion was too deep-rooted to be reconciled; and once the pain of separation is over, we are better apart.'

'You amaze me!' replied Mrs. Trent. 'I guessed, of course, that there had been some quarrel, but never thought matters had gone so far. If anything will bring Reginald Piers back to you, it is the Admiral's ruin.'

'I do not think so'—she spoke very quietly—'not that I doubt Reginald's generosity and disinterestedness.'

'I should think not,' emphatically from Mrs. Crewe.

'And,' continued Laura, 'I hope hereafter we may be good friends—more is out of the question.'

'I am *sue*,' cried Mrs. Crewe, with a sudden surprising burst of tears, 'I never thought our bright happy days of last summer would end in all this cruel disappointment; that nice, charming, agreeable Mr. Piers sent off at a tangent, and the dear blessed Admiral reduced to want!—not that he ever shall want while I have a crumb or a roof. You tell your husband, Mrs. Trent, that I can manage for him better than any one else; and, although I never did it before, I will put a card in my window *this* day (you will print it for me, Laura?—you do all those things so well), and see if I cannot nearly make my rent out of those two best rooms upstairs. I have two more for my kind, good, reverend friend, and Laura and I can be quite com—comfortable in the attics.'

'Dear Mrs. Crewe!—you are all I imagined you were!'

exclaimed Mrs. Trent. 'I assure you it will be a great comfort to Mr. Trent to think you can accommodate our friend. By the way, somebody told me that Reginald was in Paris; I should think he must be on his way home by this time. I will remind Katie's drawing-master that you would like some pupils. I think he could help you, Laura.'

When at length Admiral Desbarres understood his own position sufficiently to form any plans, his first step was to explain it thoroughly to his ward, or, as he considered her, his adopted daughter. She was shocked to see how care-worn his fine, high-bred face had grown, and how much grayer his abundant dark hair had become.

No deposed monarch could have been received with more profound and tender reverence by his most devoted and hopeful adherents, than was the noble old sailor by his *protégées*, when at length he made his appearance in Leamington Road.

'We have long anticipated this pleasure,' said Mrs. Crewe, advancing to meet him with grace and dignity, having made a most careful toilette for the occasion. 'Your presence is always a *fête* to us.'

Laura could only murmur, 'Dear, dear guardian!' embracing him with unusual impulsiveness.

'Now, my dear sir,' cried Mrs. Crewe, 'before anything is said or done, tell me, *have* you had luncheon? You will forgive my remarking it, but you have rather an exhausted air.'

'Thank you,' he replied; 'I was obliged to leave my lodging early, and have not eaten since.'

'Then let us go to luncheon *at once*,' cried Mrs. Crewe, highly delighted with this reply; and she led the way into the dining-room, where a neat little repast had been laid out with great attention as to details, and the hospitable lady of the house pressed all that was choicest upon her honoured guest.

A long and thoroughly confidential conversation ensued, in which Mrs. Crewe expounded her views, and made many practical suggestions; the deep interest and warm regard which she unconsciously displayed evidently touched and

gratified the Admiral, who agreed with much that she offered for his consideration; finally, she announced triumphantly that she was in treaty with a new 'inmate,' recommended by her good neighbour, Mr. Brown.

It was after this interview that Laura wrote the letter we have seen Winnie receive, and her reply had more of cheerfulness and content than any of her previous communications. She was full of warmest, tenderest sympathy, and Laura felt that they were once more *nearly* on the old footing of affection and confidence. Then a long break occurred in their correspondence. Laura was excessively occupied, and Winnie did not write.

The days were now longer and brighter, and one of the best effects of the necessities of her own and her guardian's position was that Laura, in her anxiety to turn her accomplishments to some use, forced herself once more to use the little painting-room, the scene of so much happiness, and so rude and sudden a disenchantment; and here the Admiral would sometimes visit her, for day by day he grew fonder of his grave, gentle, capable ward, while she felt freer and more at home with him than she had ever hoped to be.

'After all, my dear, there is nothing like a man in the house,' said Mrs. Crewe, when Laura and herself had planned the slightly-altered routine of their day's work and duty; 'it gives a sort of centre to one's ideas, an object to keep order for. For real punctuality and right management there is nothing like working for some one who can't quite understand your machinery.'

'How is that?' asked Laura; 'I should imagine it is better to work for some one who understands and can make allowances for your difficulties.'

'That is just it,' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe. 'People who are always making allowances never get anything rightly and well done, and then one gets careless one's self. I confess I like a man in the house, provided he is quiet and regular; and to have a man of the Admiral's position and character as an inmate casts a sort of halo over any home. I am sure *that* Mr. Reid ought to esteem himself fortunate to be in such an establishment.'

'*That* Mr. Reid' was Mrs. Crewe's new lodger, a very

respectable, accurate personage, recommended by Mr. Brown, who carried his business habits into the minutiae of private life, and insisted on receiving the fullest value for his money.

Then the Admiral read prayers morning and evening, and this changed the aspect of the ceremony considerably. Both prayers and passages of Holy Writ were read with tenderness and complete devotion, simple, unstrained, that breathed a blessed sense of peace and goodwill on the hearts of his hearers.

To Laura the hour of family prayer acquired a charm such as it never had before, even in her earlier days. She sometimes found herself wondering if repetition would not weaken its effect; but it did not, so marvellous is the power of sympathy in conveying to others the deep and warm convictions of an ardent spirit.

Mrs. Crewe herself was largely influenced by the presence of so exceptional a personage. One thing only troubled her. Her illustrious visitor rarely showed himself in the church affected by his *protégée*. He generally attended divine worship in a remote tabernacle where the authority of Mother Church, 'as by law established,' was not recognised, and where one or two old naval and military officers of strong religious tendencies were wont to congregate, and occasionally give discourses when the regular minister was ill or absent; the outlines of the sect being wide, and admitting all kinds of variation in the routine of its services.

Laura had taken upon herself the care of her guardian's sitting-room, carefully dusting it when opportunity offered, and replenishing a couple of vases which adorned his mantelpiece with flowers; more, she soon became her guardian's secretary. Composition was a labour to the Admiral. He wished to be short yet polite, distinct yet kind in his letters, and to his own dismay he generally made his epistles hard and abrupt; this gave him infinite trouble, and he was wont to touch and retouch his letters till they were curiosities of correction.

It was a fine warm morning in the first days of April. Laura was in her guardian's room taking some last instruc-

tions before he went out to keep an appointment with Mr. Trent, when Mrs. Crewe entered with a biscuit and a glass of sherry for the Admiral's refreshment.

' You must not go out fasting, my dear sir ! And oh ! Laura, here is a letter for you ; it came about an hour ago, but seeing it was from dear Winnie, I knew there was no hurry.' With an amiable smile she handed it to Laura, whose heart gave a wild throb, and then beat hard. She could not venture to open it before witnesses, and taking advantage of an animated conversation which arose between Mrs. Crewe and the Admiral on the subject of luncheons in general, she left the room and ran upstairs to her own. After looking intently a moment at the address, she opened it and read as follows :

' DEAREST LAURA,

' I do not know how to write to you—how to tell you what is to be told—what no one but myself must tell you. Some days ago—I do not know how long, for everything seems vague and confused to me—Reginald came here; he showed me a letter from you setting him free. He said he was unhappy, he pressed me to marry him. I consented. We are to be married immediately.

' There, I have told you everything ; I do not know if I have done well or ill, but I do not seem to have any power to say no to him. Oh ! Laura, am I very base ? I only know that I am very unhappy, though I am going to marry the man I love ! *you* know how I must love him ! Must I, therefore, lose you ? Ah ! if you knew how I value you, how ardently I wish either that Reginald had never met you or myself, you would see that, however I may act, my heart is not false to you. Will you explain all this to the Admiral ? Will you tell Mrs. Crewe ? How will they judge me ? How shall I dare to see them ? Is it not dreadful, dearest, to begin a new life under such auspices ?—and yet I cannot say no. I long to see you, yet shrink from the meeting. But you are so strong and good that I can trust you still. Write to me, help me, as you have ever done.

' I am coming to town with Lady Jervois in about a fortnight. She is most kind ; she seems to have no will

save her brother's. Write to me, dear, and if you will come and see me I will let you know where we are. I dare not come to Leamington Road. Write and tell me how the Admiral is, how he has received this strange news.

'Dear, dear Laura, do not turn against me; you are the one creature I can trust except——! Ah, he must love me well to be false to you!

'Always your loving

'WINIFRID.'

Laura sat for some minutes holding this letter in her hand, while the past rose up before her; the sweet monotony of those schoolroom days when they worked and played and rambled together, without a thought or a fear for the morrow! and nearer times, not yet a year gone by, when they had wept together for the loss of one who was father to both! How vividly their farewell look at Dresden, the silent kiss with which each pledged herself to the other, came back to her! And since—was it all real?

It would not do to sit dreaming there. She must break this news to the Admiral and Mrs. Crewe. What a task! She shrank from it with inexpressible reluctance. It was cruel to lay such a burden upon her. Yet, who else could bear it for Winnie?

The Admiral would be gone in half an hour; should she disturb him with this letter now, or wait till he returned? And Mrs. Crewe, when should she tell her? 'Not before the Admiral. Why, it is barely half-past twelve; there is yet time before he goes out; I will see if he is alone.'

She went slowly, the letter in her hand, to her guardian, and found him alone, and putting up his writing things.

'I will do all that for you, dear guardian, if you will sit down and listen to me.'

She felt she was very white, and that her mouth was parched.

'What has happened, Laura?' asked the Admiral, looking earnestly at her.

'I have a letter from Winnie,' she replied, leaning her hand on the table as the Admiral resumed his seat, 'and she is going to be married.'

'To be married!' repeated the Admiral; 'this is very unexpected. Whom has she met? Whom does she think of marrying?'

'Reginald Piers,' returned Laura, gathering up her forces. '*Whom?*' exclaimed the Admiral.

Laura repeated the name.

'Impossible!' said her guardian. 'It cannot be possible!' he repeated.

'Listen to me, dear sir,' urged Laura. 'I have long expected this; months ago accident proved to me that Reginald had mistaken his kindly friendship with myself for a warmer feeling, that he had engaged himself to me too hastily, and that he had fallen passionately in love with Winnie. You can imagine there was but one course left for me—to release him! He did his best to persuade me against this resolution; while Winnie—who is, I am certain, innocent of any intentional treachery—refused to see him or hold any communication with him; then he went away. A curious fate guided *her* to Lady Jervois. More than a month ago I had a letter from Reginald, from Paris, offering to renew our engagement. I refused. He soon after went to the Grange, and to-day I have *this!*'

The latter part of her speech was uttered hurriedly, and in a low voice, as if she distrusted her own strength. The Admiral looked at her, bewildered, for a moment.

'May I read it?' he said, looking at the letter in her hand.

Laura hesitated, and then, thinking it would tend to exonerate Winnie, she gave it to him. The Admiral read with great deliberation, while Laura watched him eagerly, her heart beating a little less painfully than when she began to speak; the first desperate plunge was over, and she experienced a certain measure of relief.

'This letter confirms your view,' he said, a slight huskiness of voice showing that he was much moved. 'It bears the stamp of good feeling. But Reginald Piers ought to have told me himself. It is all very disastrous for *her* as well as for you. I am grieved for you, Laura. God has seen fit to try you in a fierce furnace. I cannot know how your heart has stood the fire, but externally you have borne yourself well.'

He rose, and, drawing her to him, kissed her solemnly on the brow. Laura's bosom heaved at this unwonted recognition.

'I am so surprised and pained that I can hardly think distinctly,' continued the Admiral. 'I can see, however, that for such a misfortune there is no help. Young Piers ought to have allowed a longer time to elapse before he avowed all by this hasty plan of marriage; it is disrespectful to you.'

'We ought to remember,' urged Laura, 'that Winnie has no home. Reginald must feel anxious to shelter and protect her. In short, dear sir, we cannot undo what is done; let us not add to poor Winnie's uneasiness.'

The Admiral looked at her and smiled tenderly.

'My dear, you have suffered much, and I believe you will yet reap a rich reward. Be of good cheer; there is a love beyond all that any human heart can give waiting for you, if you have not already grasped it. I must not delay any longer; I am late. God be with you, Laura!'

He took up his hat and stick, and left the room. Laura stood looking after him for some seconds, and then turned mechanically to arrange his papers. By the time she had put her guardian's room in order, she was quite composed, and able to decide on the best mode of proceeding as regarded Mrs. Crewe.

Dinner was nearly half an hour late, and Laura was glad of the delay.

'You do not mind having dinner a few minutes later, my dear?' said Mrs. Crewe, coming quickly into the room. 'But now I am sure you must be quite hungry; pray sit down. For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful. Collins, you have forgotten the salt-spoons! I have not a *recherché* dinner to-day, Laura dear. Cold roast beef and salad is a great resource on cleaning-up days, but with macaroni and some preserved apricots it will, I trust, suffice to sustain nature till tea-time, when I have a *picture* of a steak with pickled walnuts for the Admiral; I am certain it is as tender as a chicken! I observe that he is obliged to be careful with his teeth—though I would not notice it for the world! Well, we have made those rooms like a new pin. Yet I daresay

that Mr. Reid will take no notice of it, or, if he does, it will only be to grumble if any of his stupid old papers have been put out of their places. Laura dear, you are not eating a mouthful; what is the matter with you? Come now, you must have a glass of wine; you are looking like a ghost, and it is just absurd to live on a crust of bread and a glass of water!

'I am sure water suits me much better than wine,' replied Laura at the end of this long speech, which had been a good deal interrupted by dispensing the beef, mixing the salad, and cutting up Toppy's dinner.

'Don't tell me,' cried Mrs. Crewe, performing an energetic fantasia on the hand-bell; 'I hate all that abstemious nonsense. You generally find the sort of people who make a merit of starving themselves, cross-grained and cold-natured. Collins, I have been ringing this half-hour! Here is your dinner, my girl; go—go and eat it up; you have had a hard morning's work; there are some cold potatoes on the lower right-hand shelf of the larder, warm them up for yourself—and, stop—here is some mustard. Bring a saucer for Toppy; I have a little piece of cake for her. Run away now and eat your dinner; Miss Piers and myself want nothing more.'

A pause ensued while Toppy's second course was arranged and presented to her, then Mrs. Crewe rose, unlocked a special cupboard, and took from thence a decanter of the sacred sherry.

'Now I insist on your taking a glass, Laura; you are looking miserably ill.'

'You need not insist, dear Mrs. Crewe. I am quite ready to take it,' returned Laura, who felt terribly nervous and tremulous.

'That's right, my dear,' cried Mrs. Crewe, pouring out a bumper. 'I will keep you in countenance; as it is not every day that you and I indulge in this fashion, let us drink my precious son's health and dear Winnie's; may they both be happy and prosperous!'

Laura felt almost startled at the curious coincidence of Mrs. Crewe thinking of Winnie at that moment, and associating her with Denzil. Did she still dream of a possible union between them? She murmured, 'May they

indeed be happy,' and fell into deep painful silence while Mrs. Crewe talked on cheerfully.

At last the dinner things were cleared away, the crumbs swept up, and Mrs. Crewe prepared for her period of repose, when, with the *Standard* in hand, or, now the Admiral was installed, the *Times*—which, as she observed, had an aristocratic tone about it—she dozed over the 'Fashionable Intelligence' or the 'Police News,' or was roused into keen attention by some thundering article against ministerial iniquity in high places; then Laura plunged into her subject.

'I am glad you thought of drinking Winifrid's health,' she began, 'for in the letter I had from her this morning she tells me she will probably soon be married.'

'Married!' almost screamed Mrs. Crewe, sitting upright in her arm-chair; 'you do not say—why, she has never said a word to lead you to suppose that there was a chance of such a thing—not, at least, that *I*' (with strong emphasis) 'was allowed to hear of. Why, I thought that no one ever crossed the threshold at Ashley Grange. Whom in the world is she going to be married to?'

'You could never guess,' returned Laura hurriedly, 'and I am almost afraid to tell you, for I know you will be vexed at first; she is to be married almost immediately to my cousin.'

'Your cousin!' repeated Mrs. Crewe, unable to take in the idea. 'What cousin?'

'Reginald Piers,' said Laura, in a low voice.

'What—your own *fiancé*—Winnie going to marry him! Well, of all the base, vile treachery I ever heard of, this is the worst! And you can sit there and tell me coolly! I declare it seems as if you had no feeling yourself.'

This was a little too much. Laura's eyes filled with tears, a quick sob heaved her bosom and caught Mrs. Crewe's ear.

'Laura dear, forgive me—I spoke thoughtlessly. Heaven knows what you must have endured! But I do not seem able to understand it. Is this the cause of your breaking with Mr. Piers? Ah! I see it all. Well, to think that Winnie, whom I loved like a daughter (indeed, I hoped at

one time she might have been), should have stolen his heart from you, who were like mother and sister in one to her ; it is more than I can bear. Oh, the bright, beautiful viper ! Never let her come near me again.'

'But, Mrs. Crewe, Winnie is more sinned against than sinning.'

Laura proceeded to plead for her as she had done to the Admiral, and ended by offering the letter she had received that morning to Mrs. Crewe for perusal, as the best defence of the delinquent she could offer.

Mrs. Crewe read it with knitted brow, and afterwards wiped her eyes as she returned it to Laura.

'Oh ! it is all very fine,' she said ; 'but between them they have cheated you out of the sunshine and prosperity of your life : of all the selfish creatures on the face of the earth, young men are the worst ! But, Laura my love, I consider that you have been decidedly ill-judging and imprudent. From your own account, Mr. Piers was more than willing to fulfil his engagement with you, and you should have held him to it. These sort of violent fancies, such as he seems to have for your cousin, die away very soon ; in a few months all would have been right, and *what* a position you would have secured for yourself, while Winnie would not be a penny the worse ! I really think——'

'No, Mrs. Crewe. It is impossible you can believe me capable of such meanness,' interrupted Laura, with much animation. 'How could any man respect a wife who could so act ?'

'Ah, my dear, men care little for anything in a woman but what contributes to their own comfort and amusement —that is, the greater number of them ; and ten to one the first quarrel he has with that handsome cousin of yours he will say he wished she had never drawn him away from you.'

'Good heavens !' cried Laura, horrified, 'you do not think he could be such a wretch ?'

'May he never be worse !' returned Mrs. Crewe, with prophetic solemnity. 'To think of all this tragedy going on under my very nose, and I never knew a word of it ! Ah ! there was one, though, now I think of it, you could not blind, clever as you both were. I remember sitting

here talking to Denzil one night not long before he sailed, and he said to me, talking of Winnie, "That dream or fancy is over ; she is a sweet creature—God help her ! for she will need help." And then, speaking of you, he said how pleased he was that you were to be with me ; and added, "If I am not mistaken, she is a grand woman." Depend upon it, *he* saw how matters stood.'

'Did Mr. Crewe say so ?' exclaimed Laura. 'I remember once thinking he perceived more than we knew. Ah ! it was a terrible time for both Winnie and myself. Come, dear Mrs. Crewe, you are, after the Admiral, my best, my only friend ; help me over this rugged bit of my road.'

'I will do whatever you like, Laura dear,' cried Mrs. Crewe, holding out her arms to her, 'and am too glad to help you in any way ; for if there ever was an angel of a girl, you are ; only do not ask me to send messages to your cousin. I am a poor insignificant widow, and I dare-say what I think is of little matter ; but if either of those creatures that have broken your heart and blighted your fortunes come near me, they will hear more than they would like.'

'My heart is *not* broken,' said Laura firmly. 'This life of ours is wide enough and rich enough to afford more than one way to happiness, or at least content.'

'Well for you you can think so!' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, with warm sympathy. 'In your place I should long to tear their eyes out—were it not for the purifying power of divine grace,' she added, remembering herself. 'Now, Laura dear, you must be quite worn out ; go and lie down, and, as you have not eaten a mouthful of dinner, I will bring you a strong cup of tea about four o'clock.'

'You are too kind and thoughtful,' said Laura, kissing her. 'But you know I am to be in B. Street with my Cheddington picture at a quarter past four, so I must go and get ready now. Wish me good luck, for if Mr. Deacon likes it he may not only buy it, but employ me to make the copy of which he spoke.'

'And *this* is to be luck for *you* !' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe tragically.

CHAPTER XXV.

Before Laura slept that night she penned a reply to Winnie's letter ; it was short, yet it brought rest and comfort to the recipient :—

‘ MY OWN DEAR WINNIE,

‘ Your letter was no surprise to me ; I always anticipated your marriage with Reginald ; your rejection of him would do me no good, and I beg you not to be miserable about me any more. I have told the Admiral everything ; he will see you when you come to town, and desires me to say that, though grieved and disappointed, he is still your friend. Mrs. Crewe, too, is not implacable. I am glad all concealment is at an end. I long to see you ; let me know directly you come. I can then learn everything. Dearest Winnie, I am always yours as in the old days, truly and lovingly,

LAURA PIERS.’

This despatched, there was nothing left but to wait and endure Mrs. Crewe's exclamations and sudden spasms of regret and despondency. The Admiral went on his way as usual ; if he wrote to Reginald he said nothing about it, and Laura was too glad to avoid the subject.

Meantime Mrs. Trent was true to her promise of trying to help her young relative, and procured her a pupil in the only son of a friend, a little crippled boy, too fragile to be sent to school ; at the conclusion of the note in which she asked Laura to call upon the boy's mother, she wrote : ‘ I have just heard the astounding news that Reginald Piers is to be married immediately, and to Winnie Fielden ! This explains much. I am infinitely vexed about the whole affair, and have evidently been mistaken in my estimate of Reggie's character.’

So the weary time of waiting wore away, and at last the expected letter from Winnie reached Laura :—

‘ How can I ever thank you enough for the blest relief

of your generous letter! We (Lady Jervois, Sybil, and I) start for London to-morrow morning; *pray* come and see me on Wednesday afternoon at the Langham. I shall be alone—and oh, how glad I shall be to see your face again!

‘Ever your loving

‘WINNIE’

‘Wednesday! why, that is to-morrow!’ exclaimed Laura, her heart beating and her pulses throbbing.

The day was clear and bright, the streets and squares of the Westbourne district were alive with the indescribable movement of spring and ‘the season,’ as Laura sallied forth to make her way to the Langham.

After a few moments, during which she almost prayed not to meet Reginald, Laura found herself tapping at a door. ‘Come in,’ said a voice, and she crossed the threshold of a large handsome room full of subdued sunshine. Her first impression was of a general litter, as small parcels, books, mantles, a hat, and a long lace scarf lay scattered about; a delicious perfume of violets pervaded the atmosphere from a large tazza. Near one of the windows, in the simple mourning dress which erst was her best, sat Winnie at a writing-table, and beside it, in her bonnet and cloak, stood Lady Jervois.

The moment Winnie caught a glimpse of her visitor she started up with a little cry, and rushed to throw her arms round Laura; she clung to her without speaking for a few seconds, covering her cheeks with kisses.

‘I knew you would come, dear, dear Laura; oh, how rejoiced I am to see you!’

‘Not more than I am to be with you.’

‘I suppose you will allow Miss Piers to shake hands with me,’ said Lady Jervois, coming forward with a smile.

‘Oh yes! dear Laura, after yourself, Lady Jervois is my kindest friend. I cannot tell you how good she has been to me.’

‘We have been some comfort to each other,’ returned Lady Jervois; ‘sit down, Miss Piers. I am just going out for an afternoon of shopping, so you and Winifrid can have a long talk all to yourselves.’

A few polite inquiries for the Admiral, a little hunting

for her list of purchases, for her patterns, her purse, etc., and Lady Jervois departed.

As soon as the door was closed behind Lady Jervois, Winnie drew near the sofa where Laura sat, knelt down beside her, and, putting her arms round her waist and leaning her head against her bosom, wept for a moment or two very quietly.

'Oh, Laura, Laura,' she whispered, 'you are looking so pale, and your eyes are so sad! It breaks my heart to see you, and yet it is delightful to be near you. Do you quite—quite forgive me?'

'With my whole heart,' returned Laura, pressing her in her arms. 'Indeed, I have little to forgive; we have all of us been rather helpless and the sport of circumstance.'

'I have so wanted to speak to you,' resumed Winnie, still in a half whisper. 'I cannot tell any one else the sort of dread that mixes with my happiness, for you know in some ways I cannot help being happy.'

'Of course not,' said Laura kindly; 'do you think I wish you to be otherwise?'

'No, I am sure you do not; but I seem heartless to myself; yet, when *he* is with me—oh, Laura! may I speak to you of Reginald?—you will not mind?'

'Not the least, dear Winnie.'

'Ah! I cannot speak without mentioning him; it is so strange how he seems in every thought—and just fills up my whole heart. Do you know it frightens me!' said Winnie more calmly, and rising to take a seat beside her cousin, whose hand she continued to hold, leaning her head lovingly on her shoulder. 'When *he* is with me, nothing is fearful or threatening—all is bright and delightful; but when I am alone, I shrink from all this happiness has cost. I fear, I do not know what.'

'I cannot mention this,' resumed Winnie, after a pause, 'to Lady Jervois—it would seem a reflection on her brother. I cannot breathe it to Reginald, who is most sensitive to any allusion of the kind; and I cannot describe the nervous horror that oppresses me. Have I done very wrong in promising to marry Reginald?—answer me truly, Laura.'

'Certainly not, dear,' returned Laura cheerfully. 'Because Reginald made a great mistake, it is not necessary that you should punish him and yourself. Do not look back: you are pledged to Reginald; simply resolve to do your best for him honestly and lovingly, and leave the rest to God. Come, let us talk of something else—it does no good to dwell on nervous fancies; and as to me, I have many sources of grave thought, besides this change of my destiny! The Admiral's affairs, my own anxiety to collect a *clientèle*—all these things give me enough to think about; you will be delighted to hear how well I am getting on;' and she plunged into a description of her small successes, which had a dubious effect on her hearer, who listened with tearful eyes and quivering lips. At the end she exclaimed:

'And while you are toiling, I shall be enjoying all the luxury of wealth, and—oh, how unjust it all seems!'

'Now tell me all about your plans,' said Laura, disregarding this parenthesis. 'I have heard but little as yet.'

'They are simple enough,' said Winifrid, flushing all over and evidently embarrassed. 'You see, both Lady Jervois and Reginald think it better the marriage should take place at once; I have nowhere to go, and to stay in the house with that horrid Sir Gilbert when he knows everything is quite impossible—and it would be equally impossible to go to Mrs. Crewe, you know that! I really have no refuge but Reginald'—her voice broke a little here—'I have no money, nothing—so it is decided that—that we are to be married in about ten days.'

'So soon!' cried Laura, startled; then after a moment's silence she added, 'I do not see that you can do otherwise. When you are his wife, dear Winnie, everything will arrange itself, and you will feel stronger and more settled. You too, dear, look pale and worn, as if you were all eyes; do not be fearful and uneasy, dearest,' she added, with the tender patience Winifrid knew so well in her old times of childish trouble.

'Ah, Laura, you are like a mother to me, though there are barely two years between us! How I wish I ever could return to you the infinite good you have done me to-day!' she exclaimed. 'I want all my courage, too; for we dine

with Mrs. Piers, and I cannot tell you how I dread it. I know she does not like me quite ; and I cannot make out how Reginald contrived to win her consent, but she has consented. She was here this morning, and took away Sybil—dear sweet Sybil (I should like you to know her) ; she brought me that scarf as a wedding-gift, but she was terribly cold and stiff.'

'It is beautiful lace—Brussels lace, I think. I do not know much about it, but I love lace more, far more, than jewels.'

'Yes ! I like lace too ; but as to presents, Reginald gives me too many ; only it is very trying about clothes and things. I am going to have just a wedding-dress and a travelling-dress. Lady Jervois is wonderfully kind, and helps me in every way ; but it is very cruel not to be able to do anything for one's self. However, Reginald says we are to go to Paris ; and as I am to have the usual Pierslynn pin-money, I can get all I want. Laura, I want you and Reginald to meet *once* as friends, before——' she stopped abruptly.

'I would rather wait until he is really your husband,' returned Laura, in a low tone. 'Where is he now ?'

'He went away to Pierslynn about a week ago, but he is to be in town to-day, in time for dinner at his mother's. He will be glad to hear that I have seen you ; I know he often thinks of you, though I see he cannot bear to speak about you. Ah, dear Laura, we shall neither of us be quite happy until we see you married to some nice charming person who has taught you to wonder how you could ever have cared so much for Reginald !'

'It is hard to say what is in the future,' Laura said carelessly. 'But, dear Winnie, time is passing ; you will want to dress for dinner.'

'Not yet, oh, not yet ; it is not quite five, and I have not said half what I wanted. Is the Admiral really coming to see me ? What do you think he will say ?'

'Everything that is kind.'

'Was he not dreadfully cut up about you ?'

'He said very little, Winnie dear.'

'What ought I to do about Mrs. Crewe ? she was always so good.'

'Ask her to come and see you and any pretty things you may have, and give her a hug and a kiss.'

'You are such a clever Laura! I have not many pretty things yet; here'—rising and going to the table where she had been sitting when first Laura came in—'here is a gift I had this morning from a friend of Reggie's; she took up a heavy antique-looking gold cross encrusted with uncut gems of many hues—'is it not a quaint old thing? This was sent to me by the Princess Moscynska; she seems a great ally of Reggie's, and says she is under some obligations to him. I am sure I do not know what! She writes prettily, does she not?' handing a pale gray note with a monogram in silver to Laura. 'I wonder who this belonged to—Poniatowski, perhaps. Reginald says she will be of great use to me in Paris.'

'Is she to meet you in Paris?'

'She generally lives there, I believe. We do not go direct to Paris. Reginald says he wants to have a peep at Normandy before the summer tide of tourists sets in; so we are to spend a week or ten days among the old Norman towns, and then go on to Paris. After that I do not know.'

'Nor care, no doubt,' said Laura, with a smile, as she glanced though the prettily-worded, rather Frenchified note, which expressed in flattering phrase the writer's wish to make her (Winnie's) acquaintance, and implied that she (the writer) was in some way indebted to Reginald for some favour or courtesy; finally, she begged Winnie's acceptance of the accompanying souvenir, which, though possessing little beauty, had the charm of association, as it once 'adorned the noble form of one of Poland's worthiest sons.'

'It is a charming note, is it not?' said Winifrid, as Laura gave it back.

'It is,' said Laura thoughtfully. 'Who is the Princess Moscynska?'

'I scarcely know; I believe she is half English, and the niece of one of Reginald's nearest neighbours; I believe they both were of the yachting party. It seems wonderful to be on easy terms with princesses—eh, Laura?—after my quiet life.'

' You will soon get used to them—they are but ladies after all. And now, dear Winnie, I must leave you. When shall I see you again ? '

' Oh, soon, soon ! and yet I do not know what engagements Lady Jervois may have made for me. I will send you a little note to-morrow ; and the Admiral—ought I not to go and see him ? only it would be dreadful to go to that house again. Oh ! tell him to make his own appointment, and I will be at home. I wish you would come with him, dearest ; I am rather afraid of seeing him.'

' You need not be. I will come with him if he will let me, but I rather think he wants to see you alone.'

' Well, just wait for five minutes longer, Laura ; does it not seem almost impossible that a year ago we were all together in dear, dreamy Dresden, and hardly remembered that Reginald was in existence ? How much has happened since ! '

' How much indeed ! But you must not keep me any longer, Winnie ; it is getting late, and I do not care to be here when Lady Jervois comes back.'

' I suppose I must let you go. Oh, I have still a thousand things to say, but you—you will come again ? I will write to you to-night. Good-bye, dear, darling Laura ; you do not know what a relief your visit has been.'

A loving embrace, a few words explaining her own engagements for the current week, and Laura was gone. Winnie looked after her for a moment, then, sitting down, rested her elbows on the table, and, covering her face with her hands, wept silently for a few minutes ; then, with a brighter expression on her countenance, went to her own room to make the best toilette her means permitted ; the idea that in another hour she would see Reggie and hear his voice gradually absorbing her, to the exclusion of all others.

The time of Winnie's stay in London was one of great excitement and mental strain to Laura. The longing to be with her cousin and of use to her, the distress she felt at the circumstances under which her hasty sombre wedding was to take place, the irresistible disappointment as the days slipped past and she could see so little of her—

all pressed heavily even on her rare self-control ; only once more did she see her dear playfellow as Winifrid Fielden, when she startled Mrs. Crewe and Laura by a most unexpected and cruelly short visit, just as Mrs. Crewe was declaring that, although it was against her principles to make any advance to a person who, whatever might be the true state of the case, had acted the part Winnie apparently had, yet out of consideration for her dear Laura she would not mind accompanying her that afternoon to call on the bride-elect.

Laura was infinitely surprised, having a keen recollection of Winnie's vividly-expressed horror of visiting the house again, and she shrewdly suspected that there was some good reason for the change. She could see that her cousin was terribly nervous, and even longing to get the visit over. She embraced Mrs. Crewe, exclaiming:

'I do not think you wanted to come to me, so I came to you ; I could not leave without seeing *you*, who made me so happy, when I was a miserable stranger, in this great awful London.'

'I am sure I am delighted to see you, dear Winnie, though I cannot deny that I have been dreadfully cut up about everything—but I do not wish to make any allusions. Tell me, are you nearly ready ? It seems such a hurried affair. Do you really think your wedding can take place on Wednesday next ?'

'No, I fancy it will be Thursday.'

'And have you a cake and all the usual etceteras?' and Mrs. Crewe proceeded to show her own intimate knowledge of all the rites and ceremonies of a fashionable wedding, till the tears rose to Winnie's eyes, and Laura came to the rescue.

'I am so sorry the Admiral is not at home,' she said. 'He would have liked to see you.'

'He has been with me this morning,' returned Winnie, with a little quiver in her voice, 'and he bade me good-bye and blessed me ! I wished so much to have asked him for Thursday, but they thought it better taste not to do so. I know he and—and Mr. Piers have had some correspondence, but we do not mention him now.'

'I am sorry for that, and sorry for the necessity,' observed Mrs. Crewe severely.

'Ah, so am I!' cried poor Winifrid, almost breaking down. 'How ill he looks! his dear beautiful eyes are larger and more far-away-looking than ever; and when I asked if Herbert might not come to us for two days, that I might have some one of my own near me, he said, "I do not presume to exercise any more authority over a lad whom I cannot help; write to the head-master; he will no doubt let him come;" so I did.'

'Would you like to see the Admiral's rooms?' asked Mrs. Crewe; 'you cannot think how nicely we have arranged them;' and Winnie was paraded through the sitting-room and bedroom, admiring with all her might.

Then she inquired kindly for Denzil, and spoke with Collins, for whom she had a little present; she even took up Toppy in her arms; and so, with scarce-suppressed tears, and with a sort of nervous haste, Winnie bade them farewell.

Mrs. Crewe, under the influence of contending feelings, sat down and wept.

'There is something heartrending about the whole thing,' she said. 'No one can help loving her, and I am sure she never *did* intend to do you harm; but as to him—I have no patience with him! I did think he was a good young man, like my Denzil; but I declare they are all alike, except the Admiral and my boy—never thinking of anything but their own whims and fancies, and cowardly into the bargain. Would that young Piers come here like a man, or at any rate one's idea of a man, and say, "Laura! I am ashamed of myself; I know I have behaved like a blackguard; but forgive me, and let us be friends, and accept a sister's portion out of my estate"? Not he! No! Laura, don't interrupt me, don't try to stand up for him; he does not deserve it, from you of all people.'

'No, dear Mrs. Crewe,' said Laura, with an irresistible smile, 'I know it would be useless; for myself, I am very thankful he does not come to make his apologies in person. When he returns a married man, we shall meet easily.'

'Well, well, you are quite beyond my comprehension,' returned Mrs. Crewe, with an air of irritation. 'I suppose it is philosophy; but to me it looks like want of feeling.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

So Winifrid Fielden was transformed into Mrs. Piers. She seemed to pass out of Laura's life for the present; an occasional letter told of the places she visited, the people she met, but they had a vague tone of constraint that Laura felt more than perceived. Now and then there was a hasty postscript, full of tender words, evidently dictated by the old loving spirit.

The routine of existence arranged itself in Leamington Road easily and tranquilly, if a little monotonously, flowing with a slow current in the channels created by the tastes and avocations of Mrs. Crewe's inmates.

The Admiral joined himself to a Christian charity organisation connected with the chapel where he worshipped, and became a Scripture-reader in a remote and demoralised quarter. The result of this occupation was want of punctuality at meal-times (which caused Mrs. Crewe infinite uneasiness), and a decided reluctance on the part of the good old man to replace any article of his toilette. This also was a source of much animadversion to his grateful *protégées*.

To Laura's great satisfaction, she found her days more and more filled with work. During the season additional pupils offered; so that before the short days came round again she found she could supply all her small personal needs, and hoped that soon she would be quite self-supporting.⁵ This anticipation roused in her the nearest approach to pleasure she had felt for many months. Time and plenty of congenial occupation were, however, doing their work of healing. The keen, nearly insupportable pain of a wounded heart, the sense of aching desolation, were by insensible degrees lifted from her; when absorbed in her painting, or feeling that her poor little pupil was acquiring a new source of pleasure in the training she was able to bestow, rifts in the dull gray atmosphere that shut out the sunshine from her soul showed glimpses of the blue sky, the pleasant lights which are always there, although the drifting mist

and cloud that passion and grief and wrong send up so often hide them from suffering humanity.

So spring tints and airs deepened and warmed into summer glow and heat, and autumn followed with its sober beauty.

Still Mr. and Mrs. Piers lingered abroad—amid the Swiss mountains, the lovely Italian lakes, the historical cities of Northern Italy—although the twelfth of September had come and gone, and the Pierslynn woods had donned the russet hues of early winter.

Winnie's letters, which grew fewer and farther between, mentioned that her husband had been very ill at Florence with a sharp attack of fever, which had weakened him a good deal, and would necessarily delay their return, but that she longed for home.

'I shall let you know when we are likely to be in London; for I suppose we shall only pass through,' she wrote. 'Though I am a bad correspondent, dear Laura, I do long to see you.'

Nothing then occurred to break the quiet routine of these months. Mrs. Crewe had not many letters from her son; the last, dated 'Yokohama,' nearly three months before its receipt, gave a good account of himself and his doings. He said he feared he would be yet another Christmas in strange latitudes, as an opportunity, very advantageous to himself and his employers, had offered for a voyage to Sydney, and he was to weigh anchor for that port in about a month.

November was nearly ended, when one afternoon Laura came suddenly into Mrs. Crewe's room.

'Dear Mrs. Crewe, here is a letter from Winnie. They are in Paris; they will be travelling to-morrow; they will be in London to-morrow night, at Claridge's, and dear Winnie wants me to go and see her the day after, as she has a bad cold, and does not intend to leave the house; they go down to Pierslynn on Saturday. Oh, dear Mrs. Crewe, think of seeing Winnie so soon!'

'The day after to-morrow?' echoed Mrs. Crewe; 'well, it is rather sudden; I wonder if you will see *him*? She does not express any wish to see me? Ah! she knows my disapprobation of the whole affair.'

'She desires her love to you, and hopes you are quite well.'

The prospect of this near meeting kept Laura wakeful the greater part of the night, and not a little nervous the following day, though she went carefully through the duties which occupied it. Next morning she was feverishly eager to keep her appointment. Mrs. Crewe was quite vexed that she ate so little dinner.

'You will be quite faint,' she said.

'Oh! you do not know how strong I am,' returned Laura, as she left the house.

Mrs. Crewe looked after her gravely, and shook her head, more in sorrow than in anger.

'She must be strong indeed, mustn't she, my precious puss?' said she to that sagacious animal, who had walked solemnly to the front door, her tail erect, and sat down upon the threshold as if contemplating the world in general. 'Will you go out or come in, Toppy? I cannot stay here all day.'

Laura on reaching the hotel was at once admitted. She found Winifrid in a handsome well-warmed room, lying on a sofa, an Indian shawl spread over her feet, and a yellow-backed French novel in her hand.

'Ah, dearest, dear Laura! I have been expecting you these two hours,' she cried, springing up and throwing her arms round her. 'I am afraid they will be back before we have had half our talk; come near the fire, take off your hat and jacket. Oh, how delightful it is to see you again! and even through the darkness of this horrid place I see you are looking so much better than when we met last spring.'

Laura gazed earnestly at her without speaking, trying to trace in what consisted the indefinable sort of change which had passed over her.

She was pale and thin, and her eyes looked larger than ever, but her travelling-dress of dark cloth fitting to perfection, her heavy gold sleeve-links and brooch, the costly rings that sparkled on her slender fingers, the exquisite little bronze shoe with its gold buckle that peeped out from beneath the folds of her skirt, all suited her refined style of beauty admirably, and to Laura's keen observation

seemed to mark with startling distinctness the contrast between the past of self-denial—of poverty—the bitter poverty that struggles hard to keep hold still of some little nicety and refinement—and the present of love and luxury and beauty. There was a languid grace about her gestures very unusual in her, which yet seemed perfectly natural.

These thoughts passed through Laura's brain while she returned her cousin's embrace, and exchanged the first hurried loving questions and answers. Then came the pause that so often comes when hearts are too full; and they sat down by the fire in silence.

'I have such quantities to say and to ask, that I do not know where to begin!' cried Winifrid at last. 'First, tell me, dear—are you—are you better?—happier?—you know what I mean. Oh, how often I have thought of you, and wished I could look in upon you—into your heart! Indeed, even when happiest—and oh! I have been *so* happy, too happy sometimes—the thought of you would come across me with such a pang!'

'I am sorry I presented myself so unpleasantly,' returned Laura, with a smile. 'Make your mind easy; I am well—I am succeeding, and I can truly say content; everything might have been infinitely worse for me.'

'If I could believe you *really* thought so,' said Winifrid wistfully; 'there is no use, at any rate, in looking back—at least, in some directions. And the dear Admiral, how is he? how does he bear being cooped up in that miserable Leamington Road house after his previous life?'

'Miserable Leamington Road house!' repeated Laura, laughing; 'I wish Mrs. Crewe heard you; or rather, I should be very sorry. Ah, Winnie, what a haven it was to us, and how thankful you were to get back to it from Liverpool!'

'I was indeed! and I *am* grateful to Mrs. Crewe. But, Laura dear, I have had some very wretched hours there; I do not think you can know how wretched.'

'The Admiral does not seem changed in any way,' replied Laura; 'at first he was greatly cast down because he had less to give, but he has quite fitted into his present life. We are all very comfortable.'

'Yes, we were once very happy together. But, do you

know, I am rather ashamed to say I have grown to think many things quite necessary that I once never dreamt of possessing !'

'How do you mean ?' asked Laura, looking affectionately at her friend, who had taken her hand and was caressing it.

'Oh ! I mean that I feel it would be intolerable to turn and mend my dresses, and rush about looking for a needle and silk to sew up a hole in my glove, before I could go out. Do not imagine I am so commonplace as to be ashamed of these things : I am simply growing lazy and luxurious. Having enough money was so wonderful at first ; but now—if I had five times as large an allowance I could spend it.'

'Beware of extravagance !' said Laura, laughing.

'Oh ! I shall never get into debt ; but beautiful things are so delightful, and I have brought some for you that I think you will like.'

She rose and touched the bell. 'Tell my maid I want her.'

Again Laura looked at her and smiled.

'Yes,' said Winnie, laughing ; 'is it not wonderful to hear me ordering my maid to come ? I was half afraid of her at first—she is such an elegant young person, as you will see ; but she is a good milliner and hairdresser. She really has taste. Madame Moscynska found her for me. Madame Moscynska always seems to know where to find what one wants.' Oh, Rosalie,' as a very tastefully-dressed, piquant little personage came into the room, 'bring me the box and two parcels addressed to Miss Piers.' (She spoke in French.) 'I am always trying to improve my French. You know we quite neglected it for German. And Reginald is so anxious I should speak it well. Madame Moscynska says it is the language of civilisation *par excellence*.'

'Not now, I think,' said Laura ; 'but tell me, how is Reggie ?'

'Ah !' returned his young wife, with a slight sigh, 'I am not quite satisfied about him. I do not think he has been so bright or so strong since that attack in Florence.'

Here Rosalie returned with the packages and laid them on the table.

'Tell them to bring lights,' said her mistress ; and then went on. 'He was so suddenly seized. We had just arrived from Pontresina, and he went to the post to look for letters. When he came back he brought one from you, and soon after he asked to read it. Then he said he felt a terrible headache and thirst, and got so feverish, could not sleep, could not eat, and would not see a doctor. I was very uneasy. He took quantities of lemonade, and after a while grew better, and we went on to Venice. But I do so wish he would consult Gull, or Russell Reynolds, or some great doctor. If you see him, try and persuade him.'

'If you fail, I am not likely to succeed.'

'Oh, I do not know,' returned Winnie, who was busy opening her parcels. 'You need not wait, Rosalie.'

A few minutes' silence, and then Winifrid displayed a couple of jewel-cases.

'Here, dearest Laura, this is what I chose for you ;' and she displayed a locket, bracelet, and solitaires of exquisitely-carved onyx, set in dull gold, solid and classic-looking. 'These are Roman, they tell me. I thought them just your style ; and —touching a spring—'you see I have put myself inside, and I know you will value the likeness far beyond its worth. Then, dearest Laura, this ring' (a charming antique enamelled head, set with diamond sparks) 'to replace your gift. See'—moving the rings on the third finger of her left hand, and showing Laura's simple little present, which was hidden by its splendid neighbours—it has never left my hand since ! I always feel there is something good and real near me when I have that on.'

'But, Winnie dear, this is too costly for me. The least little token would suffice ; this must have cost a small fortune. What does Reginald say to your spending so much ?' exclaimed Laura, gratified by her cousin's thought for her.

'Reggie? Oh, he thinks me very prudent and moderate. Here, these are Florentine mosaics ; they are for Mrs. Crewe, and there is a wee note inside the case.'

'They are very handsome. How enchanted she will be !'

'Now, I was so puzzled about the Admiral. I could not pass him over, though he has never written—never answered my letter,' and her eyes filled with tears. 'Do

you think I may venture to send him this for a paper-knife?' and she offered to Laura's inspection a mediæval dagger, with a delicately and elaborately chiselled handle.

'I am sure he will be pleased,' said Laura.

'Be sure you write and tell me how he takes it. Can you put these things in your pocket? If not—I have several photographs of different places for you, but they are very large—I am going to send them to-morrow by a commissionnaire, and these can go too.'

'Dear Winifrid, you seem to have thought of me continually.'

'Ah, Laura, I wish I could get you out of my head!' she returned, and then stood still and silent for an instant. Then, resuming her seat by the fire, she continued, 'I see you think I am scarcely prudent enough. Ah, Laura, you and I had not the faintest notion what the life of such people as I have met lately costs! Princess Moscynska, for instance; *she* is extravagant, I grant. She perfectly frightened me when we first went to Paris. I wanted everything, you know, and Reginald begged her to assist me. She was very kind and pleasant, I must say. She has exquisite taste; but as to caring what things cost! you might imagine silks and satins and velvet and jewels grew on bushes, and could be had for the plucking, the way she chose and ordered. I was quite miserable at the idea of using such a quantity of Reggie's money; but he was pleased, and I gradually came to think the prices not so tremendous. As to my little presents, I would *not* let her interfere, in spite of her superior taste. I wanted to get your *cadeau* my own self, and did not even let her see it. That was my whim, you know. She is really a delightful person—so clever, quite a patriot and a politician. I should like to hear what *you* would think of her; but I am so glad she has not come in yet.'

'Is Madame Moscynska travelling with you?'

'Not exactly; she had to come to London on business, and we came so far together. She is in this hotel, but she goes to Lord Dereham's in a week or ten days, and I think will spend Christmas with us.'

'It will be a little difficult for you at first—a great household like Pierslynn?'

'Reginald says I need not trouble myself about anything. The housekeeper and butler arrange all details ; if I want any change, or anything new, I shall only have to say so.'

There was a somewhat prolonged pause. Winifrid sat gazing into the fire, while Laura could not resist the thought, 'And all this might have been mine !' It was not the luxurious surroundings, the costly beauty of Winnie's life, that roused this ground-swell of saddened resignation, but the idea of the tender, considerate affection, of the boundless generosity, which is one of true love's characteristics. These are the jewels that form a woman's most precious possession. Yet, suppose she had not overheard that irrepressible burst of passion which changed the face of all creation to her, might not her sufferings have been infinitely greater as Reggie's wife than as his deserted fiancée ?

While she reasoned thus with herself, the door opened quietly, and a lady entered with a smooth gliding step.

Winifrid started up and exclaimed :

'Ah ! you are later than I expected. I was afraid I should not have an opportunity of introducing my cousin to you : Miss Piers—Madame la Princesse Moscynska.'

Madame Moscynska made the faintest possible little courtesy, as she passed to a seat, smiling as she did so.

'I have heard much of Miss Piers,' she said.

Laura looked at her with deep interest—interest that in some unaccountable way was almost painful.

The Princess was not so tall as either herself or Winnie, but had a stately carriage that conveyed the idea of height. She was covered completely by a circular cloak of sealskin, with a deep border of sable ; but even this did not quite conceal the shape of her graceful shoulders. A cap of the same materials as her cloak surmounted a delicate face, of a fairness that looked like the result of bleaching in hot rooms and midnight gatherings. Her mouth, small and very sweet when she smiled, was somewhat thin-lipped and closed firmly, and the eyes which she raised, as if it were an effort, to Laura's, were light blue, but darkened by lashes of a hue not often seen with a complexion like hers ; they and her eyebrows also were nearly black. Between her low broad forehead and the edge of her cap a tangle

of tiny pale gold curls peeped out, contrasting with the deep tawny fur, and from her ears hung large gipsy-like half-moons of garnet.

'Your room is warm, *chérie*,' she continued. 'Indeed, there is no honest cold in England. To-day, there is a chill clinging damp that strikes to one's chest, and yet my cloak oppresses me.'

As she spoke she unhooked the massive silver aigraffe which fastened it, and laid it on the sofa. Laura's artistic eye was charmed with her costume of brown velvet, draped and festooned with wonderful skill, and buttoned from throat to instep with heavy old-fashioned gold buttons.

'Yes! it seems wretchedly damp,' returned Winifrid. 'I could not bring myself to stir out.'

Madame Moscynska made no reply, but, approaching the fire, took up a hand-screen while she put one little foot on the fender, and then, turning towards Laura, looked at her with a steady gaze of deliberate examination—a gaze which roused a sudden feeling of proud resentment in Laura's generally quiet spirit. Under its influence she returned Madame Moscynska's glance full and unflinchingly, till the fair Pole found it more agreeable to turn her eyes on Winifrid, who leant back in her chair, watching both with a half-amused smile.

'I hope I am all you fancied me, Miss Piers,' said Madame Moscynska, with an arch smile. 'I see you observe closely.'

'My fancy never depicted you in any way,' returned Laura. 'You have the advantage of making a perfectly fresh impression.'

'Ah! if an advantage, the impression must be good—*tant mieux*,' rejoined Madame Moscynska carelessly but not uncivilly. 'And how is your cold, dear Mrs. Piers? I hope you are less *triste* than you were this morning?'

So saying she drew a chair to the fire, sat down, and took off her gloves.

'Have you had tea? No? It would do you good; let me ring for some. Mr. Piers left me at Howell and James's, and told me to tell you he would dine at the club; but Mrs. Piers, *la belle-mère*, is coming to keep you company.

I am unfortunately obliged to go to Lady Merton's, to meet some compatriots who are passing through London, and whom I must not miss, or I would stay with you myself.'

'Thank you very much,' returned Winnie, whose colour rose. 'Of course I shall be very pleased to see my mother-in-law. Oh, Laura, I wish *you* could have stayed with me!'

'I suppose you have had a long review of your mutual experiences since you parted?' said Madame Moscynska, as if obliged to say something.

'Is Toppy still alive and flourishing?' asked Winifrid, without heeding this remark.

'She is remarkably well,' replied Laura, 'and shows a greater preference for the Admiral than for any one else, not even excepting Mrs. Crewe.'

'That is ungrateful—Mrs. Crewe is so very fond of her.'

An odd constraint seemed to have fallen on them since the entrance of Madame Moscynska, and made conversation nearly impossible. Tea was hailed as a relief.

Madame Moscynska had a small table brought to her side, and her tea, with some thin brown bread and butter, placed thereon. She banished the milk jug and demanded cream, all very gently and softly, but with an air of unhesitating command. She said little, however, until her second cup was placed beside her; then she dismissed the waiter, and, after looking at the fire a while, said in a low thoughtful tone:

'You are an artist, Miss Piers; I should much like to see some of your work, for, though I do little myself, I have seen much of art. I shall be in town for ten days; pray bring me some of your smaller sketches or designs, or, in short, anything portable, to look at.'

There was an implied superiority in this request to which Laura was determined not to yield, and she was about to say her time was too much occupied, when Winifrid broke in laughing, with a little tinge of scorn in the laugh:

'Charles V. picked up Titian's pencil. Why cannot Princess Moscynska visit the *atelier* of Laura Piers?'

'Certainly,' said Madame Moscynska, quite unmoved.

'I spoke without thought. May I come and see your work, Miss Piers?'

'If you think it worth the trouble, I am at home on Tuesdays and Thursdays, between twelve and one; it is early, but there is scarce any light later.'

'Exactly,' returned Madame Moscynska. 'I shall have the pleasure of calling on you next week. I hope not to be detained longer than ten days in this dull town,' smiling. 'I love London at certain seasons—nowhere else has one so much liberty—but in December!—a slight expressive shrug of her shoulders completed the phrase.

Laura observed that when Mrs. Piers had with some sharpness uttered her last sentence, Madame Moscynska slowly lifted her eyes with a look of sleepy surprise, and that they seemed darker than she at first thought them. A rather halting desultory conversation ensued; something was said of music, and Winifrid remarked that Madame Moscynska's Polish melodies and ballads had been a new and delightful musical experience; a little talk of Italy, a wish expressed on Winnie's part that Laura would spend Christmas with them—a prompt excuse—and then Laura rose to take leave.

'But how are you going back?' cried Winifrid. 'It is a dark night, and you must not hunt about for a *fiacre* all alone! I will order one of the hotel carriages;' she rang the bell as she spoke.

'Do not trouble about me,' said Laura, smiling. 'I am not accustomed to be taken care of; it is quite unnecessary.'

'It is amazing, the freedom permitted to young English women. I do not think it would answer in any other nation,' observed Madame Moscynska.

While they spoke, the waiter came and received Mrs. Piers's orders.

Madame Moscynska made her adieux with smiling civility, and Laura followed her cousin, who led the way to her own room.

'I can't say a word to you while she is there,' said Winnie rather petulantly. 'What do you think of her? She is very charming?'

'Very. A remarkable woman. If I knew her, I might

like her very much. At present I scarcely can understand what impression she has made upon me.'

'You were always a dear, cautious thing. I am very fond of the Princess myself; she has been so kind and so useful, but I do not want her in the way when *you* are here. Laura, I am half afraid of my *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Piers to-day. But surely she will like me, for Reggie's sake.'

'And your own, dear Winnie!'

'*Dieu sait!* Well, Laura, you *will* come and pay me a visit in my new home? Oh, I shall want you so much!'

'Yes, Winnie, I will,' replied Laura earnestly. 'Some time when you are quiet and alone.'

'The carriage waits,' said Mademoiselle Rosalie, tapping at the door.

'I must let you go, then. Have you all your things quite safe? What message for Reggie? Oh, your best regards! Ah, Laura dear, your *love*, as in our old happy days! I know he thinks so much of you!'

'My warmest good wishes, at any rate. And now, good-night. God be with you, Winnie!'

CHAPTER XXVII.

THIS interview gave Laura abundant food for thought. Her first and clearest impression was that at any rate amongst the ruin of her old life and later hopes Winnie's true affection and entire sympathy remained unshaken.

That such steadfast feeling is rare between women—indeed, between men or women—must be admitted. Certain qualities are essential to produce it; on one side, at least, there must exist the power and inclination to judge events, apart from their bearing upon self; on the other, the generous imaginative warmth that glories in a friend's superiority, and can acknowledge it without a tinge of envy. It is curious that so little enthusiasm is ever stirred by descriptions of friendship, whereas this order of affection is the real salt of human life. In it there are no heart-burnings or jealousies or darkening of the understanding

by the fumes of passion or the mists of despondency; calm, clear, and harmonious, it strengthens, elevates, and satisfies; it gives cheerfulness and beauty to the most rugged and monotonous career; while the want of it is desolation. Rank, riches, power, distinction, all may be his who is yet poverty-stricken if he can never command an hour of pure unrestrained communion with some true friend whose sympathy and comprehension are thorough and complete.

The promised visit of Madame Moscynska was the source of much troublesome anticipation to Mrs. Crewe. 'Did she not fix a day? Well, then, what day did Laura think she would come? It would be nice to know, for really, in spite of all remonstrances, Collins never is fit to be seen before one o'clock; and I confess that for yours and Winnie's sake I should like to have my lilac cap on, and my silk dress. A first impression is of great importance, and I should not like this Frenchwoman' (all foreigners were French to Mrs. Crewe) 'to tell the county, when she goes down to Saltshire, that Mrs. Piers had lived with a dowdy.'

A week and more, however, passed, and no Madame Moscynska made her appearance.

'Is she really a princess, my dear?' Mrs. Crewe would ask, as serious doubts suggested themselves in consequence of the distinguished visitor's non-appearance.

'I am sure I do not know, Mrs. Crewe. Winnie always calls her the Princess.'

'Well, she ought to know,' returned Mrs. Crewe, with some awe.

It so happened that 'Madame la Princesse' either forgot or disregarded Laura's instructions respecting the hours at which she was at home, and early one afternoon, just after Laura had set out to her drawing-class, a neat hired brougham stopped at 13 Leamington Road, to the dismay of Mrs. Crewe.

'Good gracious! it must be the Princess. And Laura out! I declare it is too bad. I wonder if she will come in?'

A tap at the door, and enter Collins with a large card, on which Mrs. Crewe gazed with admiration. It was sur-

mounted by a queer-looking coronet, and bore the inscription,

'PRINCESSE MOSCYNNSKA,
'*née* COMTESSE RAKOFFSKI.'

'The lady asked for Miss Piers, 'm, and then if she could see you.'

For half a second Mrs. Crewe paused, speechless with indignation.

'Look there!' she said at length, offering the card to her inspection. 'If you can read, see the rank of the visitor whom you have admitted, without a cap!'

This rather enigmatical sentence seemed quite clear to Collins, who, perhaps enlightened by conscience, instantly clapped her hand to her head.

'Law, mum, I quite forgot! I'll go and put it on immediate.'

'Too late, Collins!' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe tragically, as she readjusted her own dress and resumed her head-gear.

Hastily adding her newly-acquired brooch and earrings to her costume, Mrs. Crewe deluged her handkerchief with eau-de-Cologne, and descended.

In that shrine of refined gentility, the drawing-room, Mrs. Crewe found a lady who was contemplating a photograph with fixed attention. It was a likeness of Reginald Piers.

A long black velvet jacket with a deep border of silver fox fur, a muff of the same, a toque of crimson plush adorned with an owl's head, a scarf of old Mechlin tied loosely round her throat, were items of a toilette which fascinated Mrs. Crewe at first sight, and kept her silent for an instant with sincere admiration. Moreover, she felt in some difficulty as to how she ought to address a princess; ought she to say 'your highness,' or 'your serene highness,' or 'your grace'? She wished she had asked Laura about it.

Meantime Madame Moscynska turned at the sound of the opening door, and advanced a step towards it, her eyes fixed gravely on Mrs. Crewe.

'I beg you will excuse me for troubling you,' she said,

in a peculiarly clear, carefully-modulated voice, and with a slight courteous inclination. ‘But, as I have been prevented from calling before, and am obliged to leave town sooner than I expected, I thought perhaps you would be so very good as to let me see some of Miss Piers’s paintings, although she herself is not at home.’

The extreme quiet of Madame Moscynska’s manner completed the impression she had created, and it was with a slight diminution of her usual self-possession that Mrs. Crewe replied :

‘Certainly, of course ; I shall be most happy ; only it is such a pity dear Laura is out : she will be so sorry. Will you not sit down—a—Madame——’

This title was a happy compromise, Mrs. Crewe thought. It was respectful enough for any rank. The Queen was addressed as Madame, and there was a foreign sound about it into the bargain.

‘Thank you ; I presume I speak to Mrs. Crewe ?’

Mrs. Crewe bowed. Madame Moscynska placed herself comfortably in an easy-chair, and looked attentively at her companion.

‘I shall be very glad to show you my young friend’s work ; but I must premise that a studio is not always a pattern of neatness, nor do I know where she keeps all her things. You will kindly excuse a little confusion.’

‘I am quite familiar with the aspect of studios ; an orderly studio would be most inartistic.’

Mrs. Crewe accordingly led the way, with many apologies for the neighbourhood of the kitchen, to the little breakfast-room below, which at that season did not look its best. Here, with much of eulogy on the genius, amiability, and general perfections of her dear young friend, Mrs. Crewe dragged out portfolios and displayed sketches, hunting eagerly for what she considered the best specimens of her young friend’s work, and rarely finding them.

Madame Moscynska scarcely spoke, but examined the various pictures begun, finished, and in progress, with much care, and as if she knew what she was about.

‘Her sketches and unfinished things are the best, as is generally the case with beginners, who are seldom com-

petent to develop their own ideas. If Miss Piers could study for a few years in Italy she might do well,' she said at last.

'She is not doing badly here,' returned Mrs. Crewe, a little nettled by what she considered faint praise.

'Indeed! you mean from a business point of view? Do you think Miss Piers would accept a commission from me? I have a little *pied-à-terre* in Paris where I try to collect a few pretty things, and I should like something from her pencil.'

'I am sure she would be charmed,' said Mrs. Crewe. 'But I am afraid you find it cold here, the fireplace is so very small. Pray come back to the drawing-room, and allow me to offer you a cup of tea, though perhaps it is rather early.'

'You are very good,' returned the Princess, with a brief, sweet smile; and she followed Mrs. Crewe, who apologised for preceding her up the steep, dark stair to the drawing-room.

'Would you take off your jacket?' asked the latter, beginning to feel quite herself again, and a good deal elated at having a princess to take a cup of tea with her. 'You do not make a long stay in town, then?'

'No; my uncle, who is a neighbour of Mr. and Mrs. Piers, writes that he is not well, and wants me to take care of him. I am half English, you know.'

'So Miss Piers told me.'

'She is very interesting—your young friend, I mean,' said Madame Moscynska, as if speaking out of her thoughts. 'How much attached to her Mrs. Piers seems to be! Is she Mr. Piers's first cousin, or——.'

'I do not exactly know,' replied Mrs. Crewe, seeing that she waited for an answer. 'Not *first* cousin, certainly. I do not think Laura has any near relations on her father's side. Winnie—Mrs. Piers, I mean—is her first cousin, but that is on the mother's side.'

'They were all brought up together, were they not?' asked Madame Moscynska languidly; 'and thence originated Mr. Piers's romantic attachment to his wife? Quite a boy-and-girl love-story, is it not?'

'You are quite mistaken, dear Madame,' said Mrs.

Crewe mysteriously. ‘The *acquaintance* might be old, but the love-affair was very new.’

‘I suppose you are well informed,’ rejoined Madame Moscynska doubtfully. ‘But I remember, when I met him last year at Dairysford, there was a report that he was engaged to a cousin, or the companion of his boyhood, and was to be married immediately. I was quite surprised to meet him on board Lord Dereham’s yacht afterwards, and then he pretended he was *disengaged*; but it is always considered allowable “*de tirer le diable par la queue*” on such topics as these.’

‘Just so,’ said Mrs. Crewe, with an air of conviction all the more profound for not knowing exactly the real import of the French phrase. ‘Well, there was a certain amount of truth in what he said. It was a curious affair altogether. Of course, I was naturally much consulted, and knew the whole affair from beginning to end. He certainly was not engaged when he joined the yachting party.’

‘Indeed!’ with an air of polite incredulity. ‘Of course it is not for me to contradict you;’ and she sipped her tea with provoking calmness, as if the topic was exhausted. ‘What good tea! and good tea is so rare in England.’

‘I am glad you like it; but I thought it was only in England you found good tea.’

‘You evidently never visited Russia,’ returned Madame Moscynska, with a gentle smile.

‘I cannot say I have any great desire to do so. But I see, Madame Moscynska, you do not believe me about Reginald Piers. Ah, I could tell you a curious story, and a very sad one!’

‘Pray do not distress yourself for me. I have seen a great deal of the world, and have often remarked how difficult it is to arrive at the truth, even when evidence appears most conclusive.’

‘But I can have no doubt about what I know from beginning to end,’ exclaimed Mrs. Crewe. ‘You have heard a jumble of true and false. But of one thing you may be quite sure—Reginald Piers never *was* engaged to his wife! He just proposed one week, and was married the next. I do not mean to say that there was not some sense in it, but still it was rather hurried.’

'Then Mr. Piers never seems to have been engaged at all,' said Madame Moscynska carelessly; 'for, of course, Mrs. Piers must have been his love all the time!'

'It is such a curious story, Madame, I really must tell it to you,' cried Mrs. Crewe, tempted beyond endurance. 'I am sure you are safe, and it will just show you how little even a nice, pleasant, generous man like Mr. Piers is to be depended upon.'

'I have occasionally kept a secret,' said Madame Moscynska, with a slightly mocking smile.

'Well, then,' began Mrs. Crewe, 'what do you say to Reginald Piers being first engaged to his cousin Laura?'

And a full and minute account was laid before Madame Moscynska, with many indignant comments, even Winifrid coming off but badly. Madame Moscynska listened in profound stillness, with half-closed eyes, and when the story was finished remarked that such instances of change and infidelity were by no means unusual, but that, owing to the peculiar social laws of England, there were worse and more scandalous instances there than in any other country.

'How may that be?' asked Mrs. Crewe, astonished.

'Because on the Continent we never permit a girl to be subjected to these whims and variations. The certainty of a home, and the position of a married woman, are secured for her by her friends. Her after sentimental sufferings or pleasures she is competent to manage, and responsible for, herself.'

'But isn't that a dreadful state of things?' cried Mrs. Crewe. 'How can anything prosper with such a system? Just look at our English homes.'

'I would rather look at them than share them,' said Madame Moscynska, rising. 'I have to thank you very much for an interesting hour, and I am sorry to think that so excellent a young woman as Miss Piers appears to be has had such a severe trial. I must say that the continuance of her friendship with her rival, under such circumstances, is beyond my lower nature to comprehend.'

'And very nearly beyond me too,' said Mrs. Crewe warmly. 'But, you see, she does not believe that either ever intended to wrong her. She thinks they were be-

trayed into their treachery before they knew what they were about.'

The Princess smiled a peculiar, not very pleasant, smile.

'I suppose Miss Piers never had any money, nor any visible temptation to draw a man into an engagement?' she said, pausing before she took leave.

'Nothing—nothing whatever,' returned Mrs. Crewe. 'Of course, she is a most charming companion, and would have been a better wife than Winifrid, though she is not so pretty.'

'Pretty? No, she is certainly not pretty. It is curious,' murmured Madame Moscynska, as if to herself. 'I have intruded too long, I fear, upon you,' she continued, 'and must bid you—'

Before she could finish her sentence the door opened and the Admiral walked in, having evidently returned from one of his nearer excursions. He stopped an instant and bowed, with a look of inquiry at the stranger.

'Rear-Admiral Desbarres—the Princess Moscynska,' said Mrs. Crewe loftily, much uplifted in spirit at the idea of entertaining such distinguished guests. 'You have no doubt heard Mrs. Reginald Piers speak of the Admiral?' said Mrs. Crewe.

'Frequently,' returned Madame Moscynska, making him a grand courtly curtsey, as if acknowledging that she was in the presence of rank and distinction. 'I am fortunate in this meeting. My beautiful young friend, Mrs. Piers, will be charmed to hear of you.'

'You are very good,' said the Admiral coldly.

'I regret having missed Miss Piers,' resumed Madame Moscynska blandly, 'though I have had the pleasure of seeing her paintings. They are full of promise. A year or two in Italy would do her infinite service.'

'She is not likely to go there,' returned the Admiral.

'It seems to be her lot to abide with me.'

'A happy destiny, I am sure. Can I take any message to Mr. or Mrs. Piers? I shall see them probably the day after to-morrow.'

'I thank you, I have none to send. I wrote to Mrs. Piers only a few days ago.'

'Then I will wish you good-morning,' said Madame

Moscynska, with a soft smile and a telling upward glance.

She was not very ready to go, however, and paused to make a civil speech to Mrs. Crewe. She stroked and admired Toppy, who came in with the Admiral, and rubbed herself against his legs. At length, after a few more words of caressing politeness to the well-bred old gentleman, she swept away.

'And this is one of Winnie's new friends?' said the Admiral, when he returned from escorting her to the door.

'A very charming, elegant woman, without any pride or affectation,' said Mrs. Crewe, who was delighted with her visitor. 'But do you know, my dear sir, she says that English tea is not drinkable in general! and was astonished to find mine so good. I thought tea, like everything else, was best in England.'

'There are some exceptions,' returned the Admiral; and added, after a pause, 'I have some letters to write this afternoon, in which I should be glad of Laura's assistance. Will you ask her to come to me as soon as she is at liberty? Do you not think Laura looks ill and worn, Mrs. Crewe?'

'I think she is looking decidedly better than she did a few months ago,' said Mrs. Crewe cheerfully. 'I consider her a marvel; and she is succeeding wonderfully. The Princess asked me in confidence if I thought Laura would accept a little commission from her. No doubt she will write about it. The notice of such a woman will be a great help to our dear Laura—a very great help.'

'I wish she did not need it, or that her objects in life were different,' remarked the Admiral, as he left the room.

On the whole Laura was rather glad to have missed the charming Princess. She was not disposed to take dislikes, but she had an odd, undefined impression that Madame Moscynska did not like her, that she had a kind of distrust and repulsion towards her. Why—Laura did not imagine, nor did it trouble her much. Her time was well occupied, and she had frequent and very interesting

letters from Winnie, whose descriptions of her new home were enthusiastic.

On this afternoon, as soon as she could disengage herself from Mrs. Crewe and her elaborate details of Madame Moscynska's visit, she went up to the Admiral's room, where he had already lit his lamp and was writing laboriously, with letters and papers lying about.

'Ah! my dear Laura, are you not a little late?' he said.

'I think not; only, night comes so soon.'

'Ay! the night,' he returned, 'when no man can work.'

'I am at your service now,' said Laura, sitting down beside him.

The Admiral proceeded to explain that he was trying to make up his report of the month's district work, which it was the custom of each member of the Society to present to the committee. In this undertaking Laura was of immense assistance, and she was soon deep in the notes and memoranda kept by her guardian.

After nearly an hour and a half of close application she had reduced the tangled matter to order, and received her guardian's brief but hearty 'Thank you, dear Laura; you have done me great service,' when, looking up, she observed a puzzled, distressed look on his handsome, kindly face.

'You are worried about something, dear guardian?'

'I have a few moments' eclipse of faith,' he returned. 'I am, you know, sorely cramped in my power to help others—probably a just punishment for my own rashness and haste to be rich. At all events, I have little beyond the funds of the Society to distribute, and am obliged to withhold help from a case which touches me greatly. A widow, with two little girls whom she struggles to support, has a very good chance of employment as a kind of outdoor servant, but she has no clothes, and no means of getting a humble outfit; and she sees the food snatched from her own and her children's lips. Unfortunately, she does not belong to our congregation, and my brother-workers say, not unreasonably, why should we take the children's meat and throw it to dogs? I should like to help her myself.'

'What!' cried Laura indignantly. 'Is this poor woman not a Christian; or—say she is not—is she not a human fellow-creature? I am sure *you* cannot think it right to act on so narrow a view?'

'I am loth to set my judgment against that of good and wise men who understand the organisation of charity much better than I do.'

'I should prefer *your* judgment,' returned Laura. 'But, dear Admiral, I have been growing rich lately; I received payment for the last quarter's lessons at the college to-day. Will you take some of it for that poor woman? I can well spare it, and it will give me so much pleasure to do some little good.'

'My dear child, I fear it is not right to take your scanty earnings, even in the cause of Christian charity.'

'But you must,' cried Laura, her face lighting up with the new joy of helping another, and she ran away quickly to her own room, returning almost immediately with a few gold pieces and some bright shillings. She laid them beside the Admiral, tenderly kissing his hand as she did so—an unusual degree of demonstrativeness on her part, for the Admiral was a man so carefully self-controlled that his fondest friends were rarely tempted to caress him.

The Admiral looked at the money in silence for an instant, and then, raising his full soft eyes to his ward, he said:

'It is borne in upon me, Laura, that I may take a portion of this money. You give me sincere gratification. I have thought of warning you that it is not well to labour solely for the meat that perisheth. You should give more of your life to the service of God, to the work of Christ's Church.'

'Whatever you wish, and whatever you say, dear Admiral Desbarres, is important to me. But in my necessary work am I not doing God's will? Must I not earn my own living? that is the thing given to me to do.'

'True,' replied the Admiral gravely. 'But beware of being too much absorbed in it, to the neglect of spiritual things.'

Laura bent her head gently, but did not immediately reply.

'The delight in beautiful things, the extraordinary charm that art appears to exercise over many, yourself amongst the number, is too apt to make you forget the Giver,' added the Admiral.

'Rather, do we not see the Giver in His gifts? Art seems a religion to me. Do you think the world would be better or worse without music, or painting, or sculpture, or architecture? Surely worse.'

"And after they had sung an hymn, they went out unto the Mount of Olives," repeated the Admiral softly. 'Certainly, music is heavenly; but the others, I doubt. They are nowhere mentioned in Holy Writ. Ah! we have wandered far from the simple, holy example of our first brethren in Christ.'

'No doubt,' returned Laura; and then, too faithful and honest to let a false impression rest upon her guardian's mind, she added: 'Can you really believe that we ought to try and model our lives on the same lines as those of the Jewish fishermen, publicans, and workmen of nearly nineteen hundred years ago? It would be impossible, and most undesirable. Do you not think that Christ's doctrine was really the grain of mustard-seed which can develop to any extent, the hidden leaven that may leaven all and every form of civilisation?'

'There is some truth in this,' returned the Admiral. 'Nevertheless, we should not so fill our lives as to leave no room for thought of our own souls and their salvation.'

'The work of life is the work of God, so far as I can understand,' said Laura modestly but firmly; 'and our civilisation, which softens our manners, making us more tender in our treatment of our fellows, purer in life, more refined in taste, is a religion in itself.'

'Yet is not this a dangerous principle,' returned the Admiral—'this working out of a mere human ideal?'

'I cannot tell,' returned Laura; 'but I dare not lead you to think that my belief is altogether yours; yet perhaps the difference is less real than it seems.'

'Perhaps,' said the Admiral. 'You appear to have thought more on these subjects than I expected. Ay,' he continued to himself, 'the Book says *He* shall reign until all things be put under His feet: the last enemy

that shall be subdued is death. This is my faith,' resumed the Admiral, after a short and solemn pause. 'This lapsed morsel of the universe will, through much suffering, be restored to the dominion of its rightful Lord, and the discordance of sin and rebellion be brought into harmony with the divine will. With sin will disappear disease and physical ill, and we shall be one with Christ in God. Meanwhile, it is the glorious work of those that believe to help the spread of the kingdom by fighting the good fight against misery and demoralisation—ay! and to spend life and substance in the warfare. So may I struggle to the end—Amen !'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HAVING once opened his heart to Laura, the Admiral treated her with increasing confidence; but she could see that there was always an undercurrent of uneasiness on her account, especially after any prayer or committee meeting at the chapel of the 'Brethren of the Kingdom,' as the small sect to which he belonged called themselves. He asked her to accompany him to the service there, to which she readily agreed, but was far from edified by her experience.

The preacher, a brother gifted with an enormous flow of words, was apparently intimately acquainted with the devil and the regions below, on the terrors of which he dilated with a minute familiarity, at once horrible and grotesque. Sometimes an old ex-colonel of artillery conducted the worship, when, although he evidently held the same opinions as the eloquent chief brother (who was a butcher by trade), the tone was much more refined and less familiar.

Laura wondered how educated gentlemen could sit and listen to the fanatical rubbish poured forth from the 'Mount Moriah' pulpit, or rather platform. She often thought it was too strong for the Admiral, but concluded that on the whole the doctrines set forth supplied some need of which she knew nothing.

Mrs. Crewe was greatly distressed at the unorthodox nature of the Admiral's opinions. 'Why he cannot be satisfied with the prayers of the Church I can't imagine!' she would say. 'It is altogether so much more gentleman-like and refined than those dissenting places. Fancy a *butcher* presuming to expound the Holy Scriptures! I should be sorry to buy my meat from such a man.'

Nevertheless, Laura was willing to submit to this, or even severer boredom, that she might draw nearer to her beloved guardian, and afford him the comfort of sympathetic companionship. His very doubts and weakness, the touching, simple faith with which he struggled towards the light he craved for, but could not always find, endeared him to her, and she felt with sincere delight that a real tie was growing between them—a relationship as truly filial as if they had been father and daughter.

The quiet routine of the weeks before Christmas was broken by an occasional dinner at Mrs. Trent's, to which the Admiral was induced to go by Laura's representations. These peeps at the commonplace world, Laura observed, did him good, and drew him out of himself.

Mrs. Crewe was so absorbed in the preparation of Christmas dainties that she had ceased to wonder each day why Denzil did not write; while the arrival of a huge hamper from Pierslynn, crammed full of game, turkeys, cheese, and all possible country dainties, did much to soften her view of Winifrid's conduct. So Christmas came upon them before they were aware.

New Year's Eve was a clear, cold, moonlit night, and after tea the Admiral had been drawn into an unusually long talk, indulging in many reminiscences called up by the season. Mrs. Crewe listened with various interjections of delight and interest. But Laura was a little distract. Echoes of her own past came back to her. Visions of the old happy childish Christmas, where no doubts or distrusts, or regrets for the past, or fears for the future, obtruded; when to-day was all sunshine and to-morrow cast no shadow.

The Admiral never stayed out of his room after ten o'clock, and so soon as he had read prayers and invoked a blessing on the New Year about to dawn upon them, he bade both ladies good-night.

'Do you mind sitting up a while, Laura?' said Mrs. Crewe. 'I feel strangely restless. I should like to see the Old Year out, and read a prayer or two for those at sea in that beautiful collection the Admiral gave me. I wonder where that dear boy of mine is this night! I have rarely had him with me at Christmas-time since his early boyhood, and, do what I would, I could not always make his holidays happy in those days.'

Laura noticed with kindly sympathy the far-away look in her eyes, and thought what a hard life the warm-hearted, simple, shrewd woman must have had.

With a sudden expressive exclamation, 'Well, thank God for His mercies!' Mrs. Crewe applied herself to the prayer-book, while Laura sat in silence, half thinking, half dreaming, and recognising with infinite thankfulness the improvement in her own mental condition since the last New Year's Day, the dawn of which she had watched with such weary hopelessness, such despair of herself, such disgust at existence! Now, indeed, if there was little sunshine in her life, it had a silvery moonlight, which, if not brilliant, had a beauty of its own.

'See!' said Mrs. Crewe, looking towards the clock, and interrupting the low murmur in which she had been reading to herself, 'in five minutes the poor Old Year will be over!'

She had scarcely uttered the words when the front-door bell sounded clearly, loudly.

'Gracious powers!' cried Mrs. Crewe; 'who can that be? And Collins is in bed these two hours! I am half afraid to open the door.'

'I will go if you like,' said Laura, a little startled as a second application to the bell was heard. 'The chain is up; there can be no danger.'

'Do, dear, and I will come close behind you with a candle.'

Laura went on, unlocked and opened as much of the door as the chain would permit. 'Who is there?' she asked.

'Will you let me in, Miss Piers?' said a deep but pleasant and familiar voice.

'My blessed boy!' screamed Mrs. Crewe, setting down the candle and rushing to embrace him, Laura having thrown the door open; and, as Denzil Crewe crossed the

threshold and was clasped in his mother's arms, the joy-bells of the neighbouring churches rang out a welcome to the New Year.

'My dear, dear son!' murmured the mother, her eyes moist with tears of pleasure. 'The best thing the New Year could bring me!'

Laura retreated to the dining-room, hastily roused the fire, and lit another gas-burner, leaving the mother and son for the first few moments together.

'And the Admiral—how goes the Admiral?' asked Denzil, as he shook hands with Laura, and looked round the pleasant, cheerful room. 'This is home-like and delightful after such a long cruise. The mother looks blooming. You must have taken good care of her, Miss Piers. It was always a comfort to me to know that she had your company.'

Laura welcomed him heartily, and then came a rapid cross-fire of question and answer. Denzil said that he left his ship at Gravesend, as he was anxious to make his report to his owners early next morning, in order to spend part of New Year's Day at home; not wishing to put his mother to any trouble, he had secured a room in a neighbouring hotel, and eaten his supper; then, remembering Mrs. Crewe's habit of seeing the New Year in, could not resist coming to give her what he knew would be a joyful surprise.

Denzil was looking browner than ever, but there was a brighter glance in his deep-set eyes, a happier smile on his lips—so far as his thick moustache permitted it to be seen—than when he left them.

'Well, dear, and I hope you have come home for good, now?' said his mother.

'I am not sure; I hope so. Home looks very tempting when one has a kindly welcome back,' with an upward grateful glance.

'And which of my letters did you get last?'

'Oh! the July one—with all the bad news in it.'

'I wrote one to Sydney in August.'

'Ah! that I never had.—No more wine, Miss Piers, thank you. You are looking ever so much better than when I bade you good-bye.'

'I am better,' said Laura simply ; and as she said so, her eyes met a glance from Denzil, so kind, so full of friendly interest, that she felt he had seen and comprehended the sore struggle she had silently endured before he left England.

She coloured at the idea of her humiliation and grief being thus recognised by a comparative stranger ; yet there was something so grave and honest in the eyes raised to hers, she felt such sympathy could not wound.

'If I can do no more for you, Mrs. Crewe, I will go to bed. You must have so much to say to each other.' And she left the room.

'I am glad to see her herself again,' said Denzil. 'She has no common strength and self-control. Your news about Piers's marriage with Miss Fielden was no surprise to me.'

'Was it not, really ?' exclaimed his mother. 'What extraordinary insight you have, Denzil ! How could you ever imagine such a thing ?'

'Oh ! I saw how the current was running with Reginald Piers before Miss Fielden was a month in your house. I was rather sorry for him at first. She was such a charming creature—any man might lose his head about her ; but Laura has even a finer nature. He ought to have kept true to her at all risks. He ought to have slipped his cable and run out into deep water if he felt his anchor tripping. But he tried for both ; he did not want to lose either—so it is better as it is. If Laura's eyes had not been opened, it would have been cruelly bad for every one. Now I hope we shall see them all happy and forgetful of the storm they have weathered.'

'I do not know,' said Mrs. Crewe doubtfully. 'I should like to see Reginald Piers paid out, in some way, for all the trouble he has given. Yes, Laura is greatly improved, I grant, but no one, save myself, knows how changed she is ; so still and silent ; so inclined to shrink from strangers, unless, indeed, in the way of business ; and then she seems as calm and unmoved as if she were fifty-one instead of twenty-one !'

Denzil did not reply ; his mother, concluding that he had had enough of the subject, plunged into an elaborate description of the various changes brought about by the Admiral's misfortunes—being by nature more disposed to

enlarge upon her own small personalities than to inquire into the wider topics of her son's adventures and experiences. He was there safe and sound, and evidently prosperous, and she wanted no more at present. Denzil listened with apparently deep attention, but really in a sort of pleasant dream. To be at home again, having accomplished the work that was given him to do, was delicious to the weary mariner.

His love and appreciation for his mother were strong and keen, but his warm regard did not prevent his perceiving and being amused by her peculiarities, for Denzil Crewe was blessed with much quiet humour. He was, in short, one of those fitted by nature 'to go down to the sea in ships, and occupy their business in the great waters'—silent, watchful, restful, keen to see, tenacious of memory, deeply enjoying repose, yet prompt, resolute, vigorous when the demand for action came.

To a man of this stamp a trial such as that to which he had seen Laura exposed, borne as she had borne it, was an irresistible demand on his sympathy. Moreover, he was eminently fitted to feel a friendship pure and simple for any woman capable of companionship; and he would have rejoiced to know that Laura was really his sister.

'So,' he said, when roused by his mother making a sudden pause, 'the Admiral has nothing but his half-pay left? Well, it is not a bad provision for a single man. You and I, mother dear, have rubbed along at one time on considerably less; and as you say Laura Piers is working her way to an honourable independence, and Miss Fielden is married, why, he has really no claims upon him.'

'Claims! My darling boy!' cried his mother. 'Why, he is just eaten up by a parcel of canting Methodists, who do not possess an ordained minister, but absolutely sit and listen to a *butcher*—yes, think of that! Imagine a man of education and old family like the Admiral listening to such a man! And Laura tells me there is a colonel of artillery and a peer of the realm who go there every Sunday, and preach in the streets on week-days. *I* think that sort of thing ought to be put a stop to; don't you, Denzil?'

'No!' he returned. 'If there is any one point on

which opinion ought to be especially free it is on so purely personal a question as religion.'

'But if this sort of thing goes on there will be an end of—of good society—and everything,' said Mrs. Crewe, with keen though not very distinct apprehension. .

'Don't be afraid, mother. These are not the days for fanaticism to do much harm. Men are too well informed and too reasonable. Only a few ignorant or over-enthusiastic men will be carried away by such transparent delusions.'

'But I am astonished at the Admiral.'

'I am not,' replied her son. 'One can see from his very *physique* that he is exactly the sort of subject over which the religious idea would acquire great power. Nor is his reason nearly so strong as his conscience or his faith. It runs in his blood, too, you know ; his uncle, the old Admiral, was always preaching, but *how* he fought his ship ! He was one of those grand old fellows who feared God and nothing else. Reason or no reason, in their day they were the salt of the earth ; but we begin to think that this earth of ours may be oversalted. Now I must not keep you up any longer. The New Year is nearly two hours old. I don't expect to sleep much. I never can sleep the first few nights ashore ; I miss the "rocking of the deep."'

'Good-night, dearest son. Heaven send you all prosperity and happiness in the opening year !'

'The same to you, mother. Good-night.'

The coming home of the widow's son gave an agreeable impetus to the tranquil life in Leamington Road. He was a great favourite with the Admiral, who was always disposed to put off his time for quitting the family group when Denzil was there. Meanwhile he was much occupied for a week or two—reaching home late, generally laden with curiosities gathered in his late voyage, among which were gifts for all. Laura was struck by the frank, unaffected kindness with which he presented his offering to herself. She was alone in the drawing-room when Denzil came in with a box under his arm. After some words of greeting, he said :

'I saw a few things when we were at Yokohama that struck me might be useful to you, Miss Piers, as Japanese

art is so much thought of now ; even if you do not care for them they may suggest designs, or come in as bits of decoration. I am no great judge of such matters, so pray take them at what they are worth.'

He opened his box, and proceeded to disentangle some small but charming vases of enamel, curious plates of green crackle china, and a few bits of rich gold, crimson, and purple embroidery.

Laura uttered an exclamation of delight.

' You have indeed brought me a wealth of ideas ! How very, very good of you to think of me ! These beautiful things are of the greatest value to me as suggestions, apart from their intrinsic worth. But you must be a remarkably good judge of such matters ! You do yourself injustice.'

' I cannot take all the credit of the choice,' he replied. ' I made great friends with the English consul, who is very learned in Japanese art and antiquities, and he was a capital guide.'

' Well, I have reaped the benefit of your joint good taste,' said Laura, holding out her hand frankly in token of her gratitude and delight. Denzil took it in the same spirit, and they shook hands like good comrades ; on which episode Mrs. Crewe entered, and opened her eyes with some surprise.

She was of course lost in admiration of her son's excellent selection ; but, being alone with him a few minutes afterwards, observed confidentially :

' They are all lovely, I know, dear, and must have cost you a heap of money ; but would it not have been better to have brought her something to wear ? A brooch and earrings, or a bracelet ; girls like these sort of things.'

' Not Laura Piers. I fancy I know her taste better than you do. I can see that, at present at any rate, she is wrapped up in her work, and what helps it is most acceptable to her.'

' That is true ; yet I am glad to see she takes more thought for appearance than she used to do. That dark-blue serge dress, with black braid (I made her buy it), is quite becoming. She looks like a lady, if she *is* plain.'

' Plain ?' returned Denzil interrogatively. ' Well, she certainly is not pretty but——'

Here the object of their remarks re-entered, with her sketch-book and pencil, and proceeded on the spot to draw a pattern for embroidery, in which, without absolutely copying the Japanese work, she adapted it cleverly to her design. Denzil looked on, and even ventured to offer advice.

'You ought to have a better painting-room,' he said, after she had worked for some time, occasionally accepting his suggestions. 'You have not light enough in that little den downstairs.'

'Oh! I manage very well,' returned Laura. 'And that little room has been a great comfort to me.'

She sighed unconsciously as she spoke.

'And I do not see that we can do any better,' added Mrs. Crewe, who was making a pretence of knitting.

'I think we can, mother. I am going to propose myself as a permanent lodger, and you will then have a room at Miss Piers's service. We will talk about it, and you must dismiss Mr. Reid.'

'I am sure I shall with pleasure,' returned Mrs. Crewe. 'He is a tiresome, low-bred fellow—punctual and precise enough, I grant; but I really would rather have that poor Holden, with his racketty ways and irregular payments.'

'Oh, by the way,' said Denzil, rising from his seat by Laura and going over to the fire, 'I have quite forgotten to tell you that one day, walking down the principal street in Sydney, I came suddenly face to face with Holden.'

'You don't say so!' cried his mother.

'It seems that he was nearly lost on his voyage out. They met with severe gales—ship sprung a leak, and the crew and passengers took to the boats. Holden's boat was nearly sucked down by the sinking ship, and only escaped to be afterwards capsized. However, Holden and another man, one of the crew, clung to the keel, and managed to right the boat. At last they were picked up by a whaler, more dead than alive, and Holden's companion did die a couple of days after their rescue. Then, being out of the track of vessels, Holden was obliged to make the trip with the whaler, which was an American. On their return voyage they fell in with a vessel bound for Port Grey, which, you know, is in Western Australia, right on the opposite side from Sydney. Then he had no ^{might}—had to draw on a cousin of his who was

settled somewhere in Wellington—and had all sorts of difficulties. In short, it was many months after the shipwreck when he succeeded in reaching this relation, and procuring money from England.'

'It is a wonderful story,' said Mrs. Crewe. 'And what is he doing now?'

'I scarcely know. He seems to have money, however, and was well dressed, but he looked awfully ill. The hardships he had undergone told upon him. He was eager for news, and curious about you, mother, and his former acquaintance, Miss Piers. He talked of coming back to England.'

A week or two later Mrs. Trent, whom she had not seen since before Christmas, called upon Laura 'to communicate,' she said, 'a great piece of news—at least very important to me.' added Mrs. Trent. 'My dear Katie is going to be married!'

Laura made the reply proper to such an announcement, and inquired who was the intended bridegroom.

'Mr Thurston's second son, a very promising young barrister. They have known a good deal of each other, and altogether it is a marriage in every way satisfactory to Mr. Trent and myself. I believe it will take place about the end of April, so you may imagine I shall have plenty to do. I have known him from the time he was about sixteen. It is quite amazing how fast these young creatures grow up and rush into life. By the bye, we dined with Mrs. Piers (the Dowager, I mean) the other day. She asked a great many questions about you.'

'You surprise me,' said Laura.

'She did, however. She had just returned from Piers-lynn, and somehow (I can hardly tell why) I do not think she was quite pleased with her visit.'

'I trust all goes well there,' said Laura uneasily. 'Winnie's letters are as bright as possible.'

'Mothers-in-law are not perhaps the best authority for the true condition of things in the *ménage* of a newly-married couple. I have no doubt all goes well at Piers-lynn,' returned Mrs. Trent, as she took her leave.

However, Laura mused long on her words, and could

not shake off the effect Mrs. Trent's observations had produced, until a long epistle from Winnie—describing a county ball, and all the fun she had had there—came to dissipate the impression she had received.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS. CREWE'S happiness, now that she had her house to herself, to use her own phrase, would have been unalloyed had she been but sure of her son's movements.

On this subject he was in some degree reserved, as they depended on the plans of his employers. He himself seemed very composed and satisfied as to his future, and told his mother that he was now in a position to afford her more substantial help than hitherto.

It was found that although Laura was not an accomplished musician like her cousin, she played simple airs, old ballads, and dreamy German waltzes with great taste. Her powers were frequently put into requisition in the evenings; and her simple readiness to oblige, her complete freedom from self-consciousness, or the smallest attempt to create an effect, gave a wonderful charm to her presence and conversation.

Between herself and Denzil a sincere and hearty friendship sprang up. They differed on many points, but that was only a source of candid and perfectly well-tempered discussion, which gave an agreeable variety to their intercourse; and Denzil, somewhat to his own surprise, found himself often speaking out his innermost thoughts, his freest speculations, to the quiet, attentive listener, busy with pencil or needle, who from time to time made some reply that showed she fully understood and sympathised.

Sometimes Denzil went straight from the city to the Kensington Museum, as the days grew longer; watched Laura at work for a while, and escorted her home.

The honest interest he took in her success, in her progress towards independence, was very cheering. He made no fine speeches as to the painfulness of a delicately-nurtured woman being obliged to earn her own living. His

clear common-sense taught him rather to respect and encourage the individuality that demanded independence as a right, and only asked room to work it out. His strictures and criticisms were always sound, often severe; for, though little learned in art, he had a most correct eye and a strong instinct in such matters.

It was a fine warm evening at the end of April, and Laura had stayed unusually late in the gallery, trying to finish a copy ordered by her first employer. She was beginning to feel a little weary, and resolved to resist the inclination to finish 'just that bit,' to 'get in this shadow a little deeper,' to 'add a touch or two to that foliage,' when a quiet voice behind her said:

'You are certainly improving very much; there is a great difference in your drawing, and especially in your colour, since last year.'

'Yes,' said Laura in the same tone, without turning to look at the speaker. 'I think I *am* doing better; but alas! what a difference between conception and execution. However, in this humbler occupation I gain knowledge, and some day I may try my wings on my own account.'

'True! one may earn the right to express one's self. I suppose it always takes time to know *what* you have to say, either on paper or canvas. At any rate you have ideas.'

'I am not so sure of that,' said Laura, laughing. 'At best they are, I fear, only the reflection of others.' And she began to put up her brushes and belongings.

'I suppose, after all,' returned Denzil, proceeding with deft fingers to assist her, 'all ideas are the development of some primary inspiration which has grown into a thousand branchlets, each making its own especial start from the parent branch, and esteeming itself a separate creation.'

When all was packed away into the compact box constructed to hold such impedimenta, Denzil took it up, saying:

'It is only half-past five. What do you say to walking across Kensington Gardens? It is such a delicious evening.'

'I shall be delighted. I feel as if I wanted plenty of air and room. I have done a good day's work, and the idea of a long walk is delightful; but the box is heavy.'

'I fancy I could manage more than that,' said Denzil, taking it up.

The air was delicious; the gardens, gay with well-dressed groups, bright with sunny-faced children, were lovely in the first tender flush of green; the chestnut trees were all powdered with the fresh pinky white of their stately wax-like pyramidal blossoms.

It was a pleasant hour. The companions, with true sympathy, enjoyed spells of silence, as well as bright passages of easy unpremeditated talk; distance was nothing under such circumstances. When they reached Leamington Road they found that Mrs. Crewe and the Admiral were out.

Denzil set down the paint box in the hall, and naturally turned into the drawing-room, which at that hour was the coolest place in the house.

'Do you know,' said Laura, as she took off her hat, 'my next attempt at originality shall be a portrait of your mother.'

As she spoke her eyes fell on the table, and before Denzil could reply she caught up a yellow telegraph envelope, her cheek growing pale, then red, as she tore it open and read :

'*Pierslynn, 11 A.M.—A son born at six this morning. All going well.*'

'Oh, Denzil!' she cried, addressing him by the name most familiar to her ear in the emotion of the moment. 'Dearest Winnie has a little boy! a baby of her own! Oh, I am so glad! I do long to see it—I hope it will be like herself. How pleased Reginald must be!'

'And you are, I see, delighted,' returned Denzil, with a kindly smile, looking at her, his dark eyes growing soft and dim. 'Laura, you *are* an original girl!'

'Why?' she asked carelessly, as she re-read the telegram.

'Because—' began Denzil, and hesitated, 'if I may say so without presumption or intrusiveness—because your peculiar circumstances scarcely account for such quick sympathy. Even for the best of friends—you could not feel more.'

'They *are* my good friends! Winnie is like my sister and my daughter, slight as is the difference in age between us. I know to what you allude, Mr. Crewe—and to-day I feel brave enough to talk of it all. I do not think any one was much to blame—least of all Winnie. And now this new young life sent among us—to draw us out of ourselves—to give us fresh hopes, fresh views—seems to change everything.'

Denzil Crewe made no reply for a minute, then he said in a low voice:

'But you loved that man? I saw that—I saw much.'

'Yes,' returned Laura quietly. 'I loved him all my life—but I do not think he loved me; he thought he did—it is well for us both I found out the truth in time. Do not let us talk about that curious episode in my life. The sharp outline of it is already fading from my memory. I want it to vanish away quickly—with all its pain and bitterness.'

'I daresay it was presumptuous of me to broach such a subject to you,' said Denzil, his brown cheek reddening, 'but I did not seem able to keep back the words—and—I am a clumsy fellow at expressing myself. I should like you to know how heartily I respect and esteem you. My opinion may not be worth much, but I would be proud to be your friend. I wish you would look on me as a true brother—and treat me as one,' and he held out his hand.

'That I will gladly,' replied Laura, placing hers in it, a smile lighting up her face—and Laura's smile was very pleasant. 'I am not so rich in friends or relatives as not to welcome such an acquisition. I must write to Reginald,' withdrawing her hand and turning to leave the room. 'It is a pleasant theme on which to renew our broken communications,' she added, as she closed the door.

Denzil Crewe looked after her for a few minutes.

'Women are wonderful creatures,' he mused, 'and not a bit logical. Why should the birth of this infant affect so quiet and sensible a girl as Laura Piers in this fashion? Yet I am not much wiser myself. Why did I feel a sort of glow at the sight of her generous emotion? There is

no accounting for feeling, yet there is something truer than logic in instinct, and instinct tells me that Piers was a fool when he threw away the chance of such a wife, even for that charming Winifrid Fielden.'

Here Toppy, who had been peacefully slumbering on one of the best chairs, woke up, stretched herself, and, deliberately jumping down, came to rub herself against his legs.

'Eh ! Tops, and you too ; wouldn't you die in defence of the kittens that you forget as soon as they are able to take care of themselves ? We only know how valuable instinct is when we see some monster without it.'

It was a strange task for Laura to write and congratulate Reginald on the birth of his first-born ; but before the sacredness of such a tie all the old feelings effaced themselves, and Laura knew that she was healed of her wounds and set at liberty. She wrote with an unembarrassed hearty warmth that surprised herself, and still more the recipient of her letter, who replied quickly, but with less ease than his correspondent.

In a day or two came a letter from the dowager Mrs. Piers, very kind and friendly in tone, and giving more particulars than had hitherto reached Laura.

'Dear Winnie was quite out of danger, but very weak, unaccountably low.' Laura was disturbed, and longed infinitely to see both mother and child, when, on returning from one of her lessons, Mrs. Crewe met her with a telegram in her hand.

'The messenger wanted an answer, dear, but I could tell him nothing. Do read it.'

'Pray come down by the 4.50 train this evening, if at all possible. Will come to meet you. She craves to have you with her. Do not refuse.'

This was signed 'Reginald Piers.'

'I suppose you will go,' said Mrs. Crewe, a little doubtfully.

'Go ? Yes, most certainly. Let me reply instantly,' and Laura put her hand to her brow while she strove

to plan her preparations. ‘First of all, to reply !’ she exclaimed.

‘It is ten minutes past twelve,’ said Mrs. Crewe, looking at the clock. ‘You will scarce have time. You must not leave this house later than four.’

‘Oh ! I have time enough—too much. I feel as if I wanted to be with her now. Dear Mrs. Crewe, do you think she is in danger ?’

‘It is impossible to say ; the telegram seems urgent. Tell me, dear, which box you will take—I will have it brought down and dusted. Ah, you see they turn to you fast enough in their day of trouble !’

It was a hurried feverish morning ; Laura striving hard to keep herself cool and collected, to arrange all things so as to leave herself free for a week or two, and not to hear Mrs. Crewe’s running fire of hopes, fears, and conjectures ; or, still worse, the agonizing thrills of evil anticipation which ever and anon shivered through her heart.

Great was the surprise of both gentlemen when they returned at dinner-time. Denzil was particularly late, so the Admiral had received a minute and thorough explanation of the whole circumstance, and retired to his room before the former came in.

‘I see you are looking for Laura,’ said Mrs. Crewe, as her son sat down rather wearily to the dinner which had been kept warm for him.

‘No, I am not,’ returned Denzil. ‘I suppose she is in the next room ?’

‘My dear, she is miles away by this time !’ said his mother, who loved a dramatic announcement. ‘There was a telegram here at half - past eleven o’clock, from Mr. Piers, and she was off post-haste. Ah ! Denzil, I am afraid the poor young creature is dying. She must be far gone before that proud, heartless woman Mrs. Piers would allow Laura to be sent for.’

‘Dying !’ repeated Denzil, dropping his knife and fork and looking earnestly at his mother. ‘That bright, beautiful Winnie Fielden dying ! Impossible ! I wish you would not say such things, mother.’

‘My dear boy, my saying so will not make her die. But, you know, with all the writing and telegraphing, they

never breathed a word of inviting Laura before ; so you may be sure there is some strong reason. I declare I never felt so much for any one as I do for Laura.'

'I have no doubt the whole affair has been very hard on her ; but I do not think she has lost much. I never liked Piers.'

'Well, I did !' cried his mother. 'I have seldom liked any one so much on a short acquaintance. And yet I flatter myself my insight into character is rather remarkable.'

'I shall be glad to have tidings of Laura's safe arrival.'

And Denzil lit a cigar and took up a book, which he did not read.

CHAPTER XXX.

MEANTIME the train rushed away into the soft twilight of a spring evening, Laura bearing the suspense, the circling hopes and fears suggested by imagination and affection, as best she might.

It was nearly night when she alighted at the Dairysford Station, and, as there was no moon, she could but faintly descry the surrounding country.

She stood for an instant puzzled by the newness of her position : the next a well-known figure emerged from the darkness at the other end of the station, and, advancing quickly, took her hand.

'How can I thank you enough, Laura, for coming so quickly !' said the voice she had loved so well, and which had some strange and indefinable restraint in its tones.

'Tell me, is she—is she——' she could not finish her sentence.

'She is decidedly stronger. I am afraid I did not frame my telegram with sufficient caution. I thought of nothing but how to get you here. Winnie has worked herself into a fever about it ever since she was able to insist on anything.'

He led her, while he spoke, to the entrance, where a carriage awaited them.

'Thank God!' cried Laura, her sense of relief, her absorbing anxiety about Winnie, swallowing up all embarrassment or awkwardness which might otherwise have attended this first meeting with Reginald.

'Last week,' he continued, 'we were in terrible anxiety; but she is rallying quicker than we ventured to hope. Her craving for you is extraordinary. What sort of a journey have you had?' and he went on rapidly to inquire for the Admiral and Mrs. Crewe, as if he wished to keep the reins of conversation in his own hands, while his careful civility was as different as possible from the frank cordiality of former days.

Soon they reached the park gates, and then they drew up before an open door, through which Laura could descry a handsome well-lit hall, a quantity of plants and flowers, and several servants; while in the background was a doorway draped with rich crimson curtains.

'You must be tired and in want of something to eat, Laura,' said her host, addressing her by her name for the first time, as he assisted her to alight, and led her through the hall to a pretty morning-room, which opened from it on the left. 'Mother, here is Laura.'

Mrs. Piers rose immediately and came forward politely.

'Very good of you to come on such short notice,' she said, giving Laura her hand with tolerable cordiality, and the greetings and inquiries usual on such occasions were exchanged. Then Mrs. Piers herself conducted her son's guest to her room, meeting *en route* a staid, respectable-looking person, who said, 'My mistress is very anxious to know if Miss Piers has arrived.'

'She has,' returned the elder lady; 'and as soon as she has dined she will go to Mrs. Piers.'

In her bedroom Laura found a nice kindly-looking girl—less formidable than the personage who had met them on the stairs, Laura thought, as she accepted her assistance in removing her cloak, and glanced in the long glass at her own attire, simple to plainness. What a great gulf seemed to yawn between her own position and that of her near relatives! But this was only a passing impression; the absorbing idea was that dearest Winnie was out of danger, and that within an hour she should embrace her.

In the dining-room Mrs. Piers awaited her coming, and attended with careful hospitality to her needs. Laura, however, had small appetite, and the dinner was soon over.

'I suppose you are as anxious to see your cousin as she is to meet you,' said Mrs. Piers. 'I scarcely know what to say about it. Send for Harman,' she continued, addressing the footman who waited on them.

'How does your mistress seem?' she asked, when the lady's-maid presented herself.

'She is sleeping sweetly, 'm. She has been very restless all day, asking what o'clock it was every half-hour; but when I went back just now and said Miss Piers had arrived, and would come up as soon as she had dined, she seemed quite satisfied, and went off into a sound sleep.'

'That will do, Harman. If Mrs. Piers wakes, let us know.—Shall we go into the drawing-room? If you are not very tired, we will not go to bed just yet, in case Winnie wakes and asks for you.'

'I am not in the least tired,' returned Laura, 'and would much prefer waiting the chance to see Winnie before I sleep.'

Laura followed her companion through an intermediate chamber, a mixture of sitting-room and conservatory—from which they passed into the room where Mrs. Piers had first received her.

'It is curious,' said that lady, after they had exchanged a few sentences, 'Winnie never mentioned you at first—that is, after she had rather eagerly inquired if we had told you of the baby's birth. Indeed, her illness has been altogether very distressing—she was either painfully silent, or still more painfully wandering; the only one who seemed able to quiet her was Reginald. And oh, my dear Laura, what a husband my son is! So kind and thoughtful and attentive!'

'It would be strange if he were not,' said Laura gravely.

'Still,' Mrs. Piers went on, 'such good feeling is not common among men, and indeed Winnie ought to consider herself the most fortunate of women to have made such a marriage, and won *such* a husband. Of course my son might have chosen whom he liked.'

'And,' returned Laura quietly, 'he *did* exercise a tolerable liberty of choice.'

'Ah ! yes—yes, of course,' said Mrs. Piers hastily, as she recollected herself. 'But, talking of Winnie, she is a dear creature, and very handsome. As I was saying, since she got a little stronger and more herself, she was always wanting you. At first, to tell you the truth, both Reginald and I thought it would be rather cool just to send for you because we wanted you.'

'The best reason you could have,' replied Laura.

'But she was so feverish this morning,' continued Mrs. Piers, 'that we sent for the local doctor, who has of course been in constant attendance, and he said we must telegraph for you at once ; now she is evidently soothed by the knowledge that you are in the house. It is very curious.'

'It seems very natural to me. You know I have been an elder sister to her all her life, and latterly a substitute—a poor one, no doubt—for her dear mother.'

'Exactly. You must have known her thoroughly. Pray, did she ever show any symptoms of a jealous disposition ?'

'Jealous ! Oh no, not the least ! She is far too frank and generous and unselfish to be jealous.'

'Oh, indeed ! but young women change so much under the conditions of a new life, and——'

Her speech was interrupted by the entrance of Reginald. He lounged in with an air of being rather weary and bored, but with a something of '*mondé*' grace Laura had not observed in former days ; yet his expression was changed. It was colder, darker, more guarded ; nevertheless she acknowledged to herself that he was even better looking than formerly.

'I hope my mother has been taking care of you, Laura,' he said. 'Are you very tired ?' and he drew his chair near her as he spoke. 'How well you are looking ! London must suit you better than it does me. Have you seen Winnie yet ? she was so wild to see you.'

'She fell asleep as soon as she heard Miss Piers had arrived,' said his mother.

'I suppose I must wish her to sleep on,' said Laura ; 'but I should like to see her before I sleep myself.'

'I will go and see if she is awake,' returned Reginald.

He left the room, but soon returned, saying that his wife was still sleeping profoundly ; and as there seemed no likelihood of her being summoned, Laura, who was somewhat exhausted by the events of the day, wished Mrs. Piers good-night. Reginald accompanied her to the foot of the staircase.

'Good-night, my dear cousin ; believe me, you are most welcome to Pierslynn,' he said, shaking hands with her, and speaking in a tone not quite so easy as formerly, while he did not exactly meet her eyes.

It struck her as remarkable, too, that he should call her 'cousin' for the first time in all these years of intimate acquaintance. He was probably anxious to convey an impression that his kinsmanly regard was still unshaken, in spite of his faithlessness in another direction.

Laura was awake and stirring early. She employed herself in writing a few lines to the Admiral, and looking out of the window.

The view was very pleasant. Immediately below was the gravel sweep before the entrance ; beyond this was a semicircular lawn, from the centre of which opened a stately avenue, bordered at each side by a double row of large old lime trees, arching over like the aisles of a cathedral. The grass was of the freshest green ; the tender hues of spring had not yet deepened into summer richness ; there was inexpressible peace and quiet beauty in the outlook, far better than stateliness or grandeur, thought Laura ; a place, indeed, to be at home in. While she gazed and dreamed, some one tapped at the door ; on opening it she saw Winnie's maid, a breakfast tray in her hands.

'If you please, 'm. Mrs. Piers desires her kind love, and would you mind taking your breakfast now, because she will be quite ready in half an hour, and longs to see you. Mrs. Piers hopes you slept well ?'

'Thank you, remarkably well. If you come back in a quarter of an hour, you can show me to Mrs. Piers's room.'

It was with almost trembling eagerness that Laura followed Harman across a landing and along a gallery to a door which shut off some charming apartments occupied by the lady of the house. The first, furnished as a boudoir, in

rose-coloured silk and white lace, with Dresden china ornaments, ingenious work-tables, and beautiful water-colour sketches; a cottage piano, in black and gold, occupying one side of the room, an exquisite writing-table of marquetry at the other.

Passing through this and a dressing-room, she was ushered into a large bedroom in which she only saw the pale fair face that rested on lace-edged pillows in the bed which was opposite the door.

'Laura—dear, dear Laura, at last!' murmured Winifrid, stretching out her arms.

Laura could not speak.

'I thought you would never come,' resumed Winifrid, after a loving embrace.

'Dearest! I came directly I had your telegram.'

'I know that; but they made all sorts of difficulties. They said you would not like to come; that I ought not to ask you; but now that I am stronger and happier, I seem to have more courage. Sit down by me, Laura; you are *my* guest, you know, and you must always be with me.'

'Yes, of course, dear love! I will do whatever you wish; only keep very quiet, or they will say I hurt you; you are trembling now.'

'I am infinitely better. And, Laura dear, tell me about every one, the Admiral and Mrs. Crewe. And so Denzil Crewe has come home; I should like to see them all again. You must talk and tell me everything, and I shall be quite quiet.'

Still holding her hand, Laura talked for a while softly and deliberately, but the young mother soon interrupted her:

'It is time for baby to come in. You must love my poor baby, Laura. It is such a funny, miserable little creature. I was so disappointed when I saw it first, and so was Reggie, though he is too good to say so; but when they let me hold it in my arms, and I thought how weak and ugly the poor little soul looked, and that perhaps few people would care for it, oh, Laura! I felt as if my heart would burst with a great wave of love and pity and tenderness; and I vowed to myself that I would devote my whole life to make the poor little mite happy and comfort-

able ; since that he has seemed somehow to be prettier and more interesting.'

'How can we possibly judge him now ?' returned Laura. 'He may yet be strong and beautiful. I imagine very little babies are never pretty.'

'Have you had your breakfast, Laura ? and is your room nice and comfortable ? Things are seldom all right when the mistress is laid up ; and I am, and will be, mistress here.'

'Of course you are ; you have no one to interfere with you.'

'N—no,' returned Winifrid, with a little hesitation.

'I am sure Mrs. Piers is too well-bred to interfere,' continued Laura.

'She is,' said Winifrid thoughtfully. 'She does not really like either you or me ; that is, she thinks me infinitely beneath my high fortunes ; but she is not unjust, and she is really kind, only she has not much penetration.'

'And *you* are so deep,' added Laura, with a kindly smile.

'Ah ! much, much deeper than I used to be,' she replied, with a slight shake of the head. 'What o'clock is it, Laura ? I cannot see the pendule.'

'It wants a few minutes to nine.'

'Baby ought to be here now. The nurse is rather formidable. I was a good deal afraid of her at first ; but one day I got very excited, and—and—oh ! I cannot tell a long story ; then I seemed suddenly lifted over everything ; since, I have laughed at some of her nonsense, and she respects me more. Hush ! here she is.'

Whereupon enter a very stately, well-dressed, stout woman, with a fashionable cap and a bundle of very fine lace and flannel and embroidery.

She performed a solemn curtsey, and, advancing, laid the bundle beside the invalid. Winifrid, after a long, loving look at the kernel enclosed in all these wraps, said, as if conferring a favour :

'Would you like to hold it, Laura ?'

Of course Laura would, and took the little morsel of humanity with some trepidation. She looked earnestly at the tiny, dusky, weird face, and wondered how such a pinched and unlovely atom could be the child of so fair a mother. It suggested legends of infants stolen by malig-

nant fairies, who leave their own ill-favoured offspring in their place. But, while she looked and wondered, the object of her thoughts opened a pair of deep blue-gray eyes, that changed the little face marvellously.

'Ah, he will be a beauty yet, Winnie!' she cried; 'he has your eyes.'

Here a still higher functionary appeared upon the scene and took command of every one and everything; this was the temporary nurse.

'Mrs. Piers had already talked enough,' she said; 'too much indeed. Baby had better be taken back to his own apartment. After Mrs. Piers had had an hour of complete repose and some chicken broth, she might exchange her bed for the sofa, and be wheeled into the boudoir; then of course the Dowager would expect to be received, and, as excitement was to be carefully avoided, the young lady had better not return until late in the afternoon.'

This dictum was uttered in a strong, heavy voice, which rather impressed Laura; but Winifrid replied with careless decision:

'Nonsense, nurse! Miss Piers came down here especially to be with me, and she will do me more good than all your nostrums. I will be quiet and try to sleep. Do not bring me broth or anything else until I ring. Laura, dear, you will come to me when I am dressed, and bring your work and stay with me. I will let you go now. What shall you do all the long morning?'

'Well, I have a letter to write; and then——'

'Oh, Reginald must show you the gardens, and take you to the waterfall. Pierslynn is such a sweet place.'

After returning from her interview with her cousin, Laura devoted nearly an hour to an elaborate description of everything for Mrs. Crewe's gratification; more than once she paused to reflect on her own curious position. A guest in the house which had been so nearly her own; a mere distant kinswoman, without the slightest claim for more than civility on the man who had been for nearly three months her affianced husband; brought into closest contact with the woman who had marred her life. It was all very strange; perhaps the strangest of all, the subtle

change she felt rather than perceived in Winnie and her husband.

There was a tinge of irritable self-will in Winnie's manner that seemed unnecessary where everything was, or appeared to be, at her disposal ; as if she had won a kind of victory, and was determined to keep it. Her graceful arrogance was amusing to Laura. To see her girlish, impulsive cousin, who yesterday was afraid to contradict the Admiral, and was not indifferent to Mrs. Crewe's disapprobation ; whose joy at the acquirement of a dress, or a new and becoming hat, was wont to express itself by a wild dance round the narrow limits of her room, thus take unhesitating command of persons so much older and more experienced than herself—to notice that in spite of childhood and youth spent amid the humble surroundings of mediocre fortune, she took the luxury, the observance, the refined and costly surroundings of her present state, as if they belonged to her of right—all this was almost too much for Laura's gravity.

She had almost completed her letter when Mrs. Piers's maid knocked at the door, and said her mistress was in the yellow drawing-room if Miss Piers would like to join her there.

It was a pleasant room, opening on a conservatory which ran along the south side of the house, and the delicious perfume of the flowers filled the air with fragrance. The furniture was rich and comfortable, but rather old-fashioned. Mrs. Piers was sitting near a work-table, reading a letter ; Reginald lounged on an ottoman, almost hidden by the *Times*. He started to his feet when Laura entered, and inquired, with every appearance of interest, how she was. Then, as she passed on to speak to his mother, he added, in a genuinely anxious tone :

‘ How do you find Winnie ? ’

‘ Very much better than I expected—and looking better still.’

‘ Ah, yes ! her looks have been wonderful all through,’ said Mrs. Piers. ‘ If we can but keep her quiet she will do well, but she is terribly excitable. I fear she has herself to thank for much of her suffering.’

‘ I do not know that ; people cannot help their natures,

and I do not think we want to change Winifrid's—eh, Laura?' remarked Reginald, with a pleasant smile.

'Certainly not,' she returned.

'It is quite right and proper that you should think your wife faultless, as she is no doubt charming,' said the mother-in-law coldly.

'And what are you going to do with yourselves to-day?' asked Reginald. 'It will be awfully dull for you, Laura, but we cannot help it just now.'

'You need not trouble yourself to amuse me,' returned Laura, with a smile. 'The sights and sounds of the country make a feast for me.'

'We can give you plenty of them, at any rate,' said Reginald. 'Suppose, mother, you take Laura for a drive after luncheon by Dairysford, through the park, and——'

'Thank you,' cried Laura, 'but I have promised Winnie to be at hand when she sends for me. A stroll round the garden will be pleasure enough.'

'But I fear, my dear, that your presence for several hours at a time will be rather too much for our dear invalid.'

'No!' exclaimed Reginald; 'you do not understand the sort of tie that exists between Laura and Winnie. Laura will be a soothing influence. What is it that milk-and-water American fellow Longfellow says:

"God gave a different gift to each—
To charm, to strengthen, and to teach."

You see, Laura unites them all.'

'A very pretty compliment, indeed,' said Mrs. Piers.

Laura smiled with a little unconscious disdain, for there was something in the speech that struck her as forced and insincere.

'Well, if you like, we can take a little walk in the grounds before luncheon,' added Mrs. Piers.

'I should like it very much.'

'I am sorry I cannot accompany you,' said Reginald, 'but I must ride over to Oldbridge. I promised to meet Dereham at Humberston's. I shall be back to dinner.'

'I have just had a letter from Princess Moscynska,' said Mrs. Piers. 'She is still detained in London, and is

far from well. She is going to Ventnor for a little change, but is uncertain of her movements after.'

'Ah, indeed!' returned Reginald carelessly. 'Well, I shall go and say a word to Winnie before I start, Laura, and tell her you kindly hold yourself ready to go to her,' and he lounged towards the door. 'By the way,' he said, pausing as he reached it, 'if you don't mind, mother, I will take the letter with me. Dereham was saying yesterday that he didn't know what had become of his niece.'

'There,' said Mrs. Piers, handing it to him. 'It contains no secret.'

'I will send for my bonnet and yours, and we shall have a pleasant stroll before the sun is too strong, for really the days grow quite summer-like and warm,' said Mrs. Piers to Laura.

They were soon strolling through the nearer woods, and Laura deeply enjoyed the quiet beauty of the scenery, the glimpses of a fine rich stretch of lowlands, fading away into blue indistinct distance on the one side—and on the other a line of picturesque hills, one of the outlying spurs of which was occupied by the Pierslynn domain.

The air was unspeakably sweet and fresh, and the woods full of song and perfume. Laura gave herself up to an enjoyment peculiarly delightful to her, drinking in the beauty of nature which she loved so well; albeit Mrs. Piers was not the most sympathetic companion.

Then came luncheon. The rest of the day was given to Winnie, and passed in pleasant, restful, open-hearted talk and sympathetic silences.

Mrs. Piers joined them for a while, and then excused herself on the plea of an imperative necessity to return the visit of some distant neighbour.

'I do not think Mrs. Piers likes me much,' said Laura, when they were alone once more.

'I do not think she cares for you, but she is not unkind; only she likes rank and grandeur and aristocratic surroundings, and they *are* very nice, Laura. Now I have no doubt she is quite happy driving out in the Pierslynn carriage as the Pierslynn dowager. She loves dear Reggie

too well not to be polite to me. She is just the sort of woman to expect her son to put an ornamental mistress at the head of his house.'

'Dearest Winnie!' returned Laura, laughing; 'you have grown worldly-wise, and a "wee" conceited, all in one short year.'

'Have I? Perhaps yes,' said Winnie, laying her head back among the cushions of her sofa. 'The last year has been like a strong light behind the life I have hitherto believed in; showing the cracks and the pins, the little patches of inferior stuff, the spots and the stains. I have seen a greater variety of people in a few months than in all my life before; but, thank God, there are heaps and heaps of kind good honest souls too, and so long as I can believe in Reginald and you, I do not care for the rest of the world, at least till baby begins to grow up.'

Contrary to all anticipation, Laura exerted a calming influence on Reginald's young wife. She grew quieter, less impatient, less talkative, and improved in strength and evenness of spirits. Reginald professed himself delighted, and elaborately thanked 'his cousin' for the good she had done.

At length young Mrs. Piers was permitted to drive out, and great were the preparations for the event. Reginald himself took the reins of the low pony-carriage, and certainly it would have been hard to find a fairer or more radiant face than Winnie's when she returned to her boudoir after this delightful foretaste of restored health and strength.

'I am so pleased to see you making such strides towards recovery,' said Laura the following evening, as she sat beside her hostess waiting for the dinner-bell to sound.

'Yes! I am far less tired after my drive to-day. Then I have such an excellent charioteer, so careful and so kind.'

'I am sure he is! But as you are getting on so well, dear Winnie, I fear I must think of leaving you.'

'Now, Laura, you really must not be odious and disagreeable. I have been so happy since you came, I cannot part with you. Why need you go?'

'Well, I don't think you want me so much now; and remember, I must not lose my pupils or neglect my work.'

There was a pause, and then Winifrid, taking Laura's hand in both hers, said in a broken voice, and with a little sob :

'Ah, Laura, Laura ! but for me you would never have been forced to work for your bread. You do not know the pain it gives me to think of this ;' she paused a moment. 'I should like to tell you something, but it would not be kind—it would not be generous ; still, your opinion would be of the greatest value. However, it is all over now.'

'Perhaps you might regret too unbounded confidence.'

'Yes, perhaps I might,' returned Winnie thoughtfully ; 'at any rate, you must not leave me for a week or ten days. Reginald is obliged to go to town ; he has only waited until I was stronger ; he ought to have gone before. Now it will be such a comfort to have you with me—and we can take such charming drives together.'

'Very well, dear Winnie. I will stay till Reggie comes back.'

Winifrid held out her arms, and drawing her cousin to her, kissed her heartily.

'There is the gong,' she said ; 'ask Reginald to come after dinner, and my love to Mrs. Piers. I hope she will take her tea with me this evening.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

Of course these ten days did not elapse without letters from the Admiral and Mrs. Crewe. The latter was eloquent on her loneliness without Laura, and expatiated much on the difficulty of keeping Collins in order ; concluding by an entreaty for early information as to when her dear Laura would return, as the house did not seem one bit like itself without her.

'It is well to be of some use,' she thought, as she handed the letter to Winifrid for perusal. .

'Yes, you must be an awful loss to her,' she remarked. 'But she cannot expect to keep you always.'

'Why not ?' said Laura quietly ; and, occupied by some train of ideas suggested by Winifrid's words, Laura leant

her head against the side of a large old-fashioned easy-chair in which she was sitting, one hand resting upon the arm.

'Look!' exclaimed Winifrid to Reginald; 'look! Is not Laura, as she sits there, wonderfully like that ancestress of yours in blue? The one in the library, I mean. Keep still, Laura, for a moment.'

'Something like,' said Reginald carelessly.

'I do not see it at all,' said Mrs. Piers. 'In fact, I cannot trace the slightest family resemblance in Laura.'

She spoke with warmth, as if she resented the idea.

Laura smiled, but coloured.

'I never remember that I have any family connections except Winnie and her brothers. I have always understood that Reginald was a relation, but how and in what degree I never asked.'

'I hope you will always look on me as a near kinsman,' said Reginald.

'Yes!' cried Winnie; 'your very next-of-kin. Do you know, I do not think you have seen half the house, or any of the pictures, Laura. You ought to show them to her, Reginald.'

'The housekeeper will do that any day,' said Laura.

'Oh!' said Reginald, starting up, 'I am still new enough to my possessions to be interested in them. There is yet nearly an hour and a half to dinner. Will you come, Laura?'

'Certainly!' and, putting aside her work, she followed him to the gallery, which was over the end of the hall opposite the entrance, and from which some of the larger bedrooms opened. He then shortly told her how the front part of the house with the larger rooms was added by Gilbert Piers in Queen Anne's reign. 'Up to which time,' said he, laughing, 'I fancy we were very small squires indeed.'

Pierslynn was not a grand house, but Laura was much interested in it. Ultimately they arrived at a long panelled, passage-like chamber, with a range of high narrow windows at one side, and a row of hard, stiff family portraits on the other.

'I am sure these pictures are terrible calumnies,' said

Reginald, laughing. ‘We never could have been such a hard-featured race.’

‘The hardness is in the colouring,’ returned Laura, examining the pictures carefully. ‘One can trace the same type all through. How very much better-looking the men are than the women !’

‘Yes. The fact is, I imagine the Pierses of that day were not sufficiently flush of cash to employ first-rate talent. There are a few more portraits in the library, which is my favourite room. It is in the old part of the house.’

This apartment was under the ‘picture-gallery,’ as the housekeeper loved to call the collection of frightful ancestors above mentioned, and had been considerably modernised. The windows opened on a terrace commanding a charming view away over the woods to the hills, with a glimpse of the plain below. There were but four pictures in it, two at each side of the high heavy mantelpiece, and two more at either side of the double door opposite to it. A courtier of the Charles II. period, in long curls and a lace jabot ; his wife, with a fringe of hair in tiny flat rings over her brow, in a blue dress, and a band of black velvet clasped round her throat with a diamond star. She had a sweet, sensible face, and there was something pleasing in the repose of her attitude, her delicate cheek resting against the red velvet back of her chair, while her jewelled hand lay on the arm.

‘There,’ said Reginald—‘there *is* rather a look of you in Dame Margery Piers. She was, I believe, what was considered a superior person in her time. And here we come to an end of the Pierslynn portrait-gallery. There are pictures of my predecessor and his father in the dining-room, but you have seen them. And oh ! those two by the door there’—pointing to two pictures of young men in the queer, high-throated, much-epauletted infantry uniforms of sixty years ago—‘they are like brothers, are they not ? but they were only cousins. That to the right is Gilbert Piers. He was the eldest brother of the late owner, but died before he was five-and-twenty. The other is a cousin of his who was in the same regiment. They were much attached to each other, and I believe this one, Geoffrey, saved the other’s life. At any rate, the Mrs.

Piers *mère* of that day had both painted to hang side by side.'

'They are both good-looking,' said Laura, looking earnestly at them. 'Tell me,' she went on, as a strange gleam of memory dimly lit up the depths of the half-forgotten past, 'was not my grandfather's name Geoffrey? And was he not a soldier?'

'Yes,' returned Reginald, advancing a step to examine the painting more closely. 'I fancy this is the man. He served in America, but I know very little about him.'

'Who was my grandmother? Whom did he marry?'

'I really don't know. My acquaintance with the family history is very imperfect. And now, Laura, that I have a chance of speaking alone, I want to beg you to stay with Winnie during my absence. In the present condition of her nerves she is not herself. You will help to keep her in a sounder state of mind. You know we all trust you. We always did. Ah, Laura, what a stay you would have been to me!'

'What can you possibly mean by such a speech, Reginald?' said Laura, looking straight into his eyes, which, after trying to support her gaze for a moment, he averted.

'I suppose,' he said, with a harsh laugh, 'I seem rather a weathercock to you; but I am not. I know what I want deucedly well. Because I fell madly in love with Winnie, that is no reason why I should not recognise *your* value. She is a charming creature, but she has not *your* reason or—'

He broke off abruptly.

'Do not suppose,' he resumed hurriedly, 'that I do either of you injustice. Winnie is a sweet, true-hearted woman, but she has not *your* tolerance. She has a somewhat impossible standard; and if a fellow don't quite attain to it, why, she will scarce give him credit for the few merits he possesses. Constancy is perhaps the rarest of qualities, and it is possible, after all, that it has no special merit. Men, or rather women, have agreed to set an adventitious value on it, whereas, in fact—'

'Ah, Reginald!' exclaimed Laura, interrupting him, as she fancied she had caught the clue to this rambling speech, 'do not trouble yourself with attempts to account

for what is perfectly accountable. We deceived ourselves. You mistook your feelings for me, and I permitted myself to be misled. You did not change. Simply, Winnie's beauty and charm revealed the truth, thank God! in time.'

'And you say this in all sincerity! I cannot doubt your voice—your eyes,' returned Reginald, with surprise. 'I never quite understood you. Are you really indifferent to what makes the lives of most women worth having?'

'I do not think you know what a conceited speech you have made,' rejoined Laura, smiling and colouring. 'That I felt keenly the unavoidable sorrow we have all undergone I do not deny, but my nature is not so poor that it has but one road to happiness.'

A great calm settled on the fair home of Reginald Piers after the master and his mother had taken their departure. The young chatelaine and her cousin enjoyed themselves in truly feminine fashion.

They breakfasted early, and, as Winnie rapidly gathered strength, strolled out to some seat beneath the trees, where she greatly enjoyed sitting, watching idly her cousin's busy pencil or needle, while they talked intermittently in all the delightful freedom of perfect trust and fullest comprehension. Not without differences of opinion, however, Winifrid being by nature conservative, and Laura equally by nature radical.

Then they dined at luncheon-time, and took long, beautiful excursions in the sweet summer evenings to more distant points of interest, when they would return to high-tea, that essentially feminine meal; after which Winifrid retired early.

'I want so much to be quite strong and well soon to surprise Reginald,' she would say; 'to be able to go with him everywhere. Besides, I want to have a peep at the "Season"—you know I always cared for vanities much more than you.'

'Naturally,' Laura would say, smiling, as she bade her good-night; and when alone in her room she often enjoyed a spell of thinking, lulled by the whispering of the fragrant lime trees which abounded near the house, and the soft freshness of the summer night stealing in like a shy caress

through her open window. In these musings it was always pleasant to her to think how warmly Winifrid loved and trusted her husband. The vague discomfort which had pressed upon her when she first came to Pierslynn had been quite obliterated ; yet she found that there was a strange distrust evolving itself in her heart towards Reginald—a curious revival of her old unacknowledged conviction that Reginald never would sacrifice his own objects out of consideration for others. Oddly enough, the idea of Denzil Crewe always presented itself when she thought of Reginald—how good and unpretendingly kind he was, like a real brother. It was pleasant to think he would be at home when she returned.

'Suppose,' said Laura, one very fine evening, 'that instead of our usual drive, you come with me to the old bridge near the Tarn. I want so much to finish that sketch, as well as two or three more, before I go ; and my time is growing short.'

The cousins strolled leisurely to the spot indicated, and Laura was soon at work, while Winnie amused herself gathering some rare ferns which grew about.

'Do you know,' said Laura, after she had been very diligent and rather silent for half an hour, 'I think I shall carry away with me the foundation of future fortune from Pierslynn.'

'I am sure I hope so ; but how ?' asked Winnie, returning to a camp-stool beside her.

'I have made such a quantity of sketches, and collected such an amount of ideas about light and air, and distance and colour, that I may even compose a picture one day.'

'Have you never had a commission yet ?'

'Never. Your friend Madame Moscynska promised me one, but it never came.'

'Oh, she did ! Well, I do not fancy she is to be depended upon. If she had given you the commission it is very doubtful if she would have paid for it.'

'I should not care for employment on those terms,' said Laura, smiling. 'But I think you must do her injustice. It is impossible that a woman, wealthy as she appears to be, would be dishonest in trifles.'

'Wealthy!' cried Winnie, with a scornful smile. 'Extravagant, if you will, but she has scarcely a sou! How she lives and dresses and travels is a mystery and a marvel.'

'That is very strange,' said Laura; and there was a pause while she put some finishing touches to her sketch. 'I suppose she is very charming?'

'Yes, she can be—when she likes. I wonder where she is wandering now?'

'Then she has left the Isle of Wight, I suppose?'

'The Isle of Wight!' cried Winnie sharply. 'How do you know she was in the Isle of Wight?'

'Oh, Mrs. Piers mentioned that she had a letter from her, and that she was gone or going to the Isle of Wight, as she was not well.'

'Mrs. Piers, my mother-in-law!' exclaimed Winifrid, her countenance darkening. 'I did not know that Madame la Princesse corresponded with my mother-in-law.'

'It may have been but one letter, for all I know,' said Laura, wishing by some vague instinct that she had never mentioned it.

But Winifrid made no answer; indeed she kept silence so long that Laura felt it oppressive, and forced herself to begin a new subject—one generally acceptable to Winifrid, and often discussed between them—'When did you hear from Herbert?' and they conversed for some time on this theme.

After their return to the house Winnie was unusually silent, and retired early, while Laura sat up reading some time longer, she felt dimly uneasy, a little dissatisfied with herself for having mentioned the letter from Madame Moseynska, for she fancied she had observed a change in her cousin from the moment she had named it.

The next morning but one was Laura's last at Pierslynn. It came all too quickly for Winifrid, though Reginald had promised to be at home to dinner on the day of her departure, an announcement which cheered his wife and restored the bright joyous look to eyes and lip which Laura had not seen there since the evening she had over-fatigued herself by walking to the Tarn.

This last morning was warm and bright, and the cousins

had planned a longer drive than usual after their early dinner.

The first post, a very early one, had brought a letter from Mrs. Crewe, expressing unmeasured delight at the prospect of seeing her dear Laura again, and a few kindly lines from the Admiral to the same effect. So Laura felt less depressed than she expected to be by her approaching departure. Pierslynn was lovely, and Winnie very dear; but she had no place in the one, and the other was no longer hers.

'You know I do not consider that we are parting,' said Winnie; '*entre nous*, I intend to make Reginald take me up to town the week after next. It is too late for the Drawing-room, but I can see something of the Season, and see you too, darling, and have Mrs. Crewe to dinner. It will be such fun.'

She said this as they were returning from a long drive, and on entering the house Winnie exclaimed:

'Oh! here is a letter from Mrs. Piers, and one for you, Laura.'

Laura saw with some surprise that it was directed in Denzil's handwriting, and, seeing her cousin absorbed in Mrs. Piers's letter, she took it to her own room, fearing Mrs. Crewe might be ill, or that he had something else untoward to communicate. The envelope contained another letter, and a little note from Denzil.

'DEAR MISS PIERS—The enclosed reached me half an hour ago. My mother tells me we shall have you back the day after to-morrow. I assure you the whole household is rejoicing at the prospect, and Toppy "purrs" her anticipations. The place has not seemed the same since you left. Pray present my compliments to Mrs. Piers, and believe me always,

'Yours most sincerely,

'DENZIL CREWE.'

'How good they all are!' thought Laura, turning with some curiosity to the letter enclosed.

It was directed in a strange, illiterate-looking hand, bore the Sydney postmark, and was addressed to

'MISS LAURA PIERS,
(Care of Denzil Crewe, Esq.),
'Messieurs Gibbon and Paul,
'Corbett Court, E.C., London.'

'I know no one in Australia,' said Laura to herself as she broke the big untidy-looking seal, and found within a letter in different and better caligraphy, though the hand which produced it was evidently weak and unsteady, and two enclosures: the first she looked at was a slip of paper dated Sydney, April 10, 18—, and contained these words:

'This letter is forwarded by the last directions of James Holden, who died here yesterday.'

'WILLIAM SHERMAN.'

The other was a sealed note directed to Mr. George Winter, 27 Gray's Inn Road. The letter ran thus:—

'To Miss Laura Piers.

'MADAM—I still hope to make the following communication in person, but having been unwell for some time, I think it wiser to commit it to paper, as I should not like to quit this world without an effort to right a wrong for which I am partly responsible.

'First, you are the rightful owner of Pierslynn. It is generally believed your grandfather, Geoffrey Piers, died unmarried, and your father was always considered illegitimate. Geoffrey Piers *did* marry your grandmother, Marie Lavelle, a Canadian, more than six months before his son was born. The marriage is entered in the register of St. Olave's Church, City. The letters which are necessary to prove that Geoffrey Piers who resided at Rythinbridge from 1825 to 1828, and the Geoffrey Piers who married Marie Lavelle at St. Olave's in June 1827, were one and the same man, I left in charge of a friend, George Winter, fearing to lose them in my wanderings. He does not know what is in the packet, and will only give it up to the person named in a letter signed by me. I have named *you*—go to him, and give him your card.

'Then consult Thurston and Trent. The letters were

addressed to an old aunt of mine, and fell into my hands after her death. I never liked Reginald Piers. He looked on me with contempt, so I was glad enough to put an extinguisher on his boasting when he thought he was Lord of Pierslynn. Then he stopped my mouth, and said you and he were fond of one another, and he would marry you and make it all right; only he did not like to play second fiddle to his wife, so I had better hold my tongue. As no one was to be robbed I didn't mind, and he helped me out of the corner. Then I met Denzil Crewe, and he told me Piers was married, but *not* to you. I have intended to go back ever since and set matters right, yet I don't seem to get strong enough, so I write these particulars. I may be able to travel by and by; if not—'

Here the sentence ceased, and a little below was written, with an evidently failing hand:—

'The above is all true, so help me, God. Look to it.
JAMES HOLDEN.'

'SYDNEY, April 8, 18—'

CHAPTER XXXII.

LAURA read this curious production twice before she was able to comprehend it. Even then it seemed like the wanderings of fever. Her knowledge of the family ramifications was so vague that she did not see at first how the marriage of her grandfather could affect her. She laid aside the letter and thought hard and painfully, going over the time of her brief engagement to Reginald step by step, but she was not much moved by the letter. It was the expiring effort of a distorted mind, and unworthy of notice —only a melancholy evidence of an evil spirit. Still, as she thought, it was strange how this wretched man's assertions fitted in with many circumstances she recalled.

She remembered a Mr. Holden, who had been in Mr. Trent's office with Reginald, calling on Mrs. Crewe, and that he seemed curious about their engagement. Then perhaps Mrs. Piers's implacable opposition was due to the fact that

she believed her (Laura's) father was illegitimate ; and, above all, was not Reginald's hitherto unaccountable determination to marry herself thus accounted for ? Nay, his evident desire to carry out their engagement, in spite of his passion for Winifrid, answered to the exigencies suggested by this horrible letter ! She was weak and foolish to let it torment her, but conviction of the possibility that this strange story might be true increased with every additional moment of reflection ; the ground on which she stood seemed to crumble beneath her as her doubts of Reginald grew thick and fast.

That he, her hero still, although he had forsaken her—her ideal of all that was refined and generous and chivalric—should have stooped to rob her, and then deceive her into an avowal of the secret, nearly subdued love, which had been the romance of her quiet life ! It was too dreadful. Why did not that wretched man die in peace, and leave *her* in peace ? No possessions, no mere wealth, could ever atone for the destruction of belief in honour, truth, fidelity. Reginald a criminal ! Winnie the wife of a dis-honoured traitor ! It was too tragic for credence. It was like the impossible horror of a bad dream. To whom could she turn for advice ? To none ! Perhaps none need ever know. More mature reflection might show her the folly of being disturbed ; for the present she would not utter a syllable to any one. If she ever thought the matter worth speaking of, it would be to Reginald she would first address herself. For the present, she would try to banish the subject from her mind.

With this determination she went downstairs to join Winnie. But the spell of repose was broken—every word, every topic, seemed to point to and illustrate the subject that Laura strove so diligently to banish from her thoughts. She could not escape from the dreadful consciousness that she was surrounded by lies—nay, in danger of becoming herself a lie if she continued to keep this wonderful piece of knowledge festering in her heart. More than once Winnie said, ‘I am sure you are not well, or you are over-tired ; you are not yourself, dear Laura. Must you go to-morrow ? Reginald would be so pleased to find you here.’ But Laura was now burning to be away. Safe

and undisturbed at Mrs. Crewe's, she could think more clearly. Meanwhile, she was miserable, restless, at times angry, at others almost touched to tears at the mere idea that she or any one could have it in their power to force Reginald and Winnie from that lovely home, and then again telling herself that such a romance was too improbable. The longing to escape from Pierslynn was so strong that she almost counted the moments till the carriage was at the door to convey her to the railway station, and even her parting with Winnie was spoiled by these dominant ideas.

On reaching Euston, to Laura's great surprise the door of the carriage was opened by Denzil Crewe.

'You here!' cried Laura. 'I by no means expected such attention. Mrs. Crewe need not have troubled you.'

'She did not say anything about it,' said Denzil, smiling. 'But I found I could get off in time to meet you—so here I am.'

Though eminently self-helpful, Laura felt keenly the pleasure of being taken care of, and especially to-day. That *any* one should take this trouble for her was soothing to her heart, aching as it was with doubt of others and distrust of self.

So she asked cheerfully for Mrs. Crewe and the Admiral, and was interested in Denzil's replies. She even noticed that he seemed especially bright and well, and that he had lost in some measure the sailor look he generally had when he first returned from a voyage.

The rumbling of the cab supplied all deficiencies in conversation during the long drive to Leamington Road, where Laura found 'the fatted calf had been killed,' and all things decked in festive array.

'My darling girl!' cried Mrs. Crewe, opening the door and embracing her with one comprehensive arm, while she held Toppy, arrayed in a fresh red ribbon, under the other. 'You are indeed welcome! We have missed you terribly, and dear Toppy has been quite inconsolable. Come in, dear. Tea is ready—you must be hot and tired and dusty after the journey. Ah, Denzil! so you went to meet her!—that's a good boy. Here! Collins, Collins! take Miss Piers's box.'

'That hamper and the basket of plants are for you, dear Mrs. Crewe. Here, Collins, give the driver this.'

'Pray do not trouble yourself; Denzil will settle. There, shut the door. Now I shall not say one word to you till you have had your tea; you must be quite exhausted. The Admiral has not come in yet; he went to a meeting of the Mount Moriah Charity Club early. He will be famished, I am sure; he left the parcel of sandwiches I made up for him behind, and you know he will not buy even a penny cake for himself.'

It was a cheerful, friendly meeting, and Laura in no way regretted Pierslynn. Here she was naturally, legitimately of some importance; there she felt strange, and in a certain sense an intruder. In spite of Reginald's elaborate, observant politeness, she felt that he was ill at ease in her presence, and no one is really welcome who creates constraint.

When tea was over and warm greetings exchanged with the Admiral, who joined them soon after they sat down to table, Laura produced her portfolio in order to satisfy Mrs. Crewe, who of course subjected her to a severe cross-examination.

'How many servants do they keep, dear? Two men in livery and a butler, but no groom-of-the-chambers? Well, I am rather surprised at that; at Coombe, my grand-uncle's place, they always had a groom-of-the-chambers. I am sorry Mrs. Piers could not see company while you were there; you would of course have met all the *county*.'

'I suppose so. A great many people called, but I did not see them.'

'I should have supposed they would call upon *you*,' said Mrs. Crewe loftily—'a near relation of the owner of Pierslynn.'

'There are much greater people and places than Reginald and Pierslynn in Saltshire,' returned Laura, laughing, 'and I am afraid my relationship to him is too vague to be recognised by county magnates. The only one I spoke to was a near neighbour and great friend of Reginald's, Lord Dereham.'

'Oh, indeed! was he agreeable?'

'I do not know. He is a tall, thin, pale, distinguished-looking, elderly man, with watery eyes and an air of being dreadfully tired. When Reginald said, "My cousin Miss Piers—Lord Dereham," he made a beautiful bow, and said, "Ah yes, Miss Piers," and then he strolled away without another word.'

'Pierslynn must be a charming place,' said Denzil, looking up from the drawings, in which he had been much interested. 'I like your water-colour sketches better than anything else you do, Miss Piers. What a delightful home! Like most sailors, I love trees and hills and country life, and my favourite air-castle is to possess a nest among the green fields before I die.'

'I love the country and scenery too,' returned Laura; 'but I am not sure that I should like to live there always.'

'I doubt, however, if Pierslynn suits you,' said Denzil, looking at her so earnestly that, although always at ease with him, she coloured, perhaps because conscious of the secret that vexed her soul. 'You are looking ill and worn—'

'Well, upon my word, Denzil, that is a polite speech!' cried his mother. 'I thought sailors were more gallant.'

'I am too sincerely interested in Miss Piers to make her fine speeches,' replied Denzil, with grave kindness.

'And so Mr. Piers is still in town?' asked Mrs. Crewe.

'No; he returns to-day.'

'I have an idea I saw him yesterday in Lombard Street in a carriage with a lady,' said Denzil.

'Perhaps so; his mother most likely,' observed Laura.

'I do not think it was his mother.'

'It is hard to say,' returned Laura carelessly; then, gathering her drawings together, 'I feel so tired and sleepy that I must bid you good-night.'

'We must not keep you up. God bless you, my dear child!' said Mrs. Crewe, folding her in her arms.

'Good-night, Miss Piers,' said Denzil, as he held open the door for her to pass through; 'it is very nice to think we shall see you to-morrow morning as usual.'

'Thank you,' returned Laura, 'and how nice for me to be at home with you all again!'

'I wonder does she really think so?' said Denzil, returning to his chair.

'That she does, if she says so,' returned his mother; 'she is the truest girl I ever met.'

'Well, her visit to Pierslynn has done her no good. That worthless cousin of hers has spoiled her life. I suspect meeting him again has been too much even for her self-command. I wish she had not gone. I fear her love for him was too deeply rooted to be easily displaced.'

'Nonsense, Denzil! Do you think a right-principled girl like Laura would permit herself such feelings towards another woman's husband?'

'And do *you* think, mother,' he returned, with a somewhat grim smile, 'that a name and a ceremony can wipe out in a moment the passion and tenderness of years? The best cure is another guest for the empty chambers of the heart.'

'Ah! that is just like a man. I am afraid there is little constancy in your sex; though I *always* say your wife will be a lucky woman.'

'I hope she will think so,' said Denzil, laughing. 'I will have a smoke in the garden before I turn in. Good-night, mother.'

Laura was too wearied in mind and body to sleep at first, but exhaustion struggled against nervous tension. Painful dreams robbed her sleep of rest, and she woke soon after dawn with a vague sense of distress.

It was some relief to her to recognise the humble, familiar 'plenishing' of her own little room, and to know that she had escaped from Pierslynn and its painful associations; and for a few minutes she dwelt with pleasure on the kindly, brotherly interest Denzil had shown towards her the previous evening. How fortunate she had been in making kind friends! How good Mrs. Crewe was! And the Admiral, who filled a father's place so lovingly—and Denzil, too. He would not change—not, at least, until he married. Then both mother and sister and friend must yield to a higher claim. But if she was isolated, how much more lonely must her father have been! She had always recognised a something melancholy in the expression of his

portrait. She rose, unlocked her treasure-drawer, and took out her father's portrait. It was a noble, sad face.

'How I should have loved him!' she thought, as she gazed upon it. 'I wish I had inherited some of his good looks—beauty is such a glorious gift! He must have been terribly alone without a family tie. His birth—not to be spoken of save with bated breath. No mother's kin to befriend him, as *I* had. And if all this was unnecessary shame—if, indeed, he was a rightful member of his father's family—how cruel to have let him suffer!' Yes, she could trace a likeness to her grandfather Geoffrey's picture; only her father's face looked more resolute, more intellectual.

And so she sat by the open window, the portrait in her hand, and thought round and round in the same painful circle of doubt and indecision. What ought she to do? She was growing more convinced that there was truth in the strange story sent her from the grave. But how much? Could she believe that Reginald—an English gentleman, a generous, warm-hearted man as he always seemed—had cheated her of her birthright? His faithlessness in affection might be explained and condoned, but this dishonesty must have been a matter of deliberate choice! What ought she to do? She shrank from exposing the man she once loved so well to the contempt of others. And, supposing the extraordinary assertions of this man Holden were true, the question as to her future line of conduct remained still unanswered. Could she rob Winnie and her baby of home, fortune, position—all? Impossible. Yet her sturdy English common-sense rebelled against the shameful wrong done her—against the mesh of falsehood and false seeming by which she was surrounded.

Gradually her ideas cleared. First, she would, if possible, ascertain the truth respecting the circumstances detailed in Holden's letter. Once she was certain on this point, she would decide her future course. Nor would she be unmerciful if it were ever in her power to punish.

Even so unfinished a decision brought her composure. After dressing, she sat down to write to Winnie, but the dark barrier of a secret rose up between them and checked the easy flow of confidence. Her letter was short, though

loving ; and when it was finished she occupied herself in arranging her belongings and planning out the day.

There was plenty to do ; she must gather up her neglected *clientèle*. In all probability she would always have to win her living by her own toil—and this was no appalling prospect to Laura. She only wished she had not been disturbed by this horrible letter, just as she had grown quite calm and comparatively happy. A knock at her door changed the current of her reflections.

'What—up and dressed !' cried Mrs. Crewe. 'I had made up my mind to bring you a nice cup of tea and a round of buttered toast. I am quite vexed with you for getting up so early. Why, the Admiral has not come down yet, and I have heard nothing of Denzil.'

'I have a great deal to do to-day, Mrs. Crewe, and I am quite rested.'

'Come then. There ! I hear the Admiral's door opening. We shall be in nice time for prayers. You know that dear, high-bred saint of a man offered to give up reading prayers to Denzil if I wished it ; but Denzil made him such a nice speech, something about his being better fitted to offer up prayer and praise—I cannot remember exactly what—but I know the Admiral was pleased, and shook hands with him on the spot. Ah ! Laura dear, if my boy had been in the Royal Navy there would not be a more brilliant officer, or a more polished gentleman, in the service.'

'He is quite as much a gentleman out of it,' said Laura, smiling.

'Good-morning—God bless you !' said her kind guardian as Laura approached him, laying his hand lightly for a moment on her head.

'Good-morning, Mrs. Crewe. Shall we wait for Denzil ?'

'Certainly not, Admiral. I regret he should not be ready, but he was writing to a late hour in his room, and — Collins, Collins ! Come, come, come—*prayers*, Collins !'

'I suppose you will rest at home to-day,' said the Admiral to his ward. 'I shall not be obliged to go out till the evening, when I have promised to give a short

address at a tea-meeting for the ragged children of the Christian Brethren's Institution. Laura, my dear, if you are disengaged I should like you to accompany me.'

'Yes, of course. I shall be happy to go.'

'There is a slight difficulty,' said the Admiral, pausing, as if reflecting how to surmount it. 'After the meeting is over I must (as one of the elders) attend a council in the vestry adjoining; but during that, Laura, you can remain in the schoolroom. Some of the ladies who interest themselves in the periodical feast will doubtless stay with you.'

Laura looked up suddenly with some dismay, and met Denzil's deep-brown eyes, lit up with an amused smile.

'Couldn't I help, sir?' he said. 'I shall have a long day in the City. I will dine there and join you, if you will let me, about eight or half-past, and bring Miss Piers back at once. When does the feast begin?'

'About half-past five. It will be over before half-past eight. I shall be much obliged if you will take charge of Laura. I may be detained longer than I expect.'

'Then give me the address,' said Denzil, taking out his pocket-book.

After giving it, and with many apologies requesting Mrs. Crewe to make the dinner somewhat later, as they would be obliged to start before tea-time, the Admiral retired.

'Thank you for saving me from the Mount Moriah ladies,' said Laura, smiling. 'It was an act of real friendship. You don't know what a terrible bore the whole thing is to me.'

'For my part,' said Mrs. Crewe, with an air of severe sense, 'I highly approve of everything that possibly can be done for the spiritual improvement of the lower orders, but I do not like going among ragged children.'

'I am afraid you are an indifferent Christian, mother.'

'I daresay I am no more of a miserable sinner than my neighbours,' she returned. 'I would gladly give my mite to get the poor clothes and food, and I do not mind going to see them at their own homes; but to sit down side by side with fifty or sixty little ragamuffins is more than I could do.'

'Is it not frightful to think that such numbers of poor

little helpless, irresponsible creatures are in the world ?' said Laura, who was not disposed to take a cheerful view of things in general. 'It is disheartening to see the mass of misery round one. What charity, what benevolence, can cope with it ?'

'None,' replied Denzil, rising. 'Education and increasing industry may do something, but charity is useless, except in isolated instances. Well, Miss Piers, I will come and rescue you from the ragamuffins my mother dreads so much. I should like to hear the Admiral's address : I do not think he has the gift of speechifying.'

'Perhaps not in the ordinary sense,' said Laura thoughtfully. 'But his earnestness is always impressive. I should think he was likely to do a great deal of good to the poor and ignorant.'

'I am sure he ought,' observed Mrs. Crewe ; 'he gives away all his substance. Mr. Brown says that a string of beggars follow him at the Metropolitan station whenever the policeman's back is turned ; and that he seems to have given sight to the blind, for that man at the bridge begins to scramble his fingers all over the page of the blind Bible he has, and shout out verses about "seeing your brother have need" and "lending to the Lord" the moment the Admiral comes near, though he has been gossiping with the Irish apple-woman for an hour before !'

'My mother is an awful sceptic ; is she not, Miss Piers ? Well, good-morning.'

'I am nothing of the sort,' Mrs. Crewe called after him good-humouredly, as he left the room. 'But I hate impostors, and I do not feel half so much for people born to work, and who might work and often won't work, as I do for poor helpless untrained gentry with all the needs of their class. Were I rich, *those* would be *my* objects.'

'But the Admiral befriends all,' said Laura, smiling, as she arranged some sketches and designs to take to her High Art patron. 'I am a genteel pauper, and what would have become of me but for him ?'

'You, my dear ! you would always have kept your head above water. I wish you would not talk of yourself in that way—it provokes me ! I am sure you are more deserving of Pierslynn than the people that have it.'

'Oh, nonsense,' exclaimed Laura, forcing herself to smile, for Mrs. Crewe's remark struck her strangely. 'I am no better than any other hard worker.'

'Are you going out?'

'Yes; I have several places to go to. I must not lose my connection, and I have been nearly three weeks away.'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

HAVING accomplished her business visits satisfactorily, and found that her place had been supplied in only one instance, Laura bent her steps to Mrs. Trent's residence. She had found an invitation for herself and the Admiral to Miss Trent's wedding; she decided to refuse it in person, and thus find the opportunity she sought. It was a little past luncheon-time, but she had scarcely reached the drawing-room when Caroline, the second daughter, a merry little damsel of thirteen or fourteen, came running upstairs.

'Oh, Miss Piers, mamma says will you come in to luncheon? We have not finished yet—do come down.'

And Laura went down to the dining-room.

'I am very glad indeed to see you,' said Mrs. Trent cordially, as she rose to meet her, a picture of solid prosperity and content. 'When did you return? James, a chair here for Miss Piers. You came back yesterday? Very good of you to call so soon. What will you take? There is some cold roast lamb and curry. James, some lamb.'

'How is Miss Trent?' asked Laura.

'Oh, quite well—a little tired. She is staying with her future mother-in-law at Bushy. Dear Mr. and Mrs. Thurston are so kind and so fond of her.'

There were only the three younger children and their governess at table, and these Mrs. Trent soon dismissed.

'Children are such a nuisance when you want to talk comfortably,' said Mrs. Trent; 'and I want to hear all about Pierslynn. We are to have the pleasure of seeing you and the Admiral at the wedding?'

Laura excused herself and her guardian; and Mrs.

Trent, though she said all that was right and proper, did not press her invitation too vehemently.

'If you will not take anything more,' said Mrs. Trent, 'let us go upstairs.'

And they settled themselves for a comfortable talk on the balcony of the smaller drawing-room.

'Now tell me all about Pierslynn,' repeated Mrs. Trent, leaning back in a folding-chair and slowly fanning herself. 'I take quite an interest in Reginald and his young wife. What is the baby like ?'

'A funny, puny-looking little thing ; but it improved immensely before I left.'

'And they have a nice place ?'

Laura gave a glowing description of it and Winifrid's happiness, her own enjoyment, and every one's kindness.

'And—you will forgive me, dear Laura, if the question is intrusive ; you know I am not prompted by idle curiosity —how did you and Reginald meet ?'

'In unembarrassed friendliness,' said Laura, smiling and colouring a little. 'I think we are *both* glad we discovered the true state of his feelings before it was too late.'

Mrs. Trent looked at her with wide open eyes.

'You and your cousin Winifrid are most amazing people,' she said ; 'and she is as great friends with you as ever ? not at all jealous about her husband ?'

'Winnie jealous of *me* !' returned Laura, with frank surprise. 'That would indeed be absurd !'

'Well, I do not know,' said Mrs. Trent, laughing ; 'I can't help thinking that, were I a man, I should be very fond of you.'

'If you *were* a man you would not. I think some might like me ; but I shall never again believe that any one could fall in love with me.'

'Nonsense, my dear. There is a sort of soft repose in your manners, a kind of feeling in your voice, that must be very attractive to many men. But these personalities are very rude. *Revenons à nos moutons*. How does Winifrid bear her honours, and get on with the county ?'

They again plunged into the Pierslynn question, and presently Laura brought the conversation round to the point she had waited for.

'There are some curious old portraits of various bygone Piers in a kind of gallery, and several more modern in the library. I found a Geoffrey Piers—my grandfather, I believe—among them.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' said Mrs. Trent, with a little reserve.

'Mrs. Trent,' said Laura, with some earnestness, 'I have never known much of my own family. Can you tell me in what degree I am cousin to Reginald ?'

'Oh ! I am by no means well up in such matters—third or fourth cousin, I suppose. I believe he is *my* third cousin, once removed, to be accurate ; but I do not know exactly where your father came in. I must show you some of Katie's pretty things before you go, Laura,' she added, with the evident intention of changing the subject.

'Thank you,' returned Laura. 'But I want first to understand whereabouts I come on the family-tree.'

'Why trouble about such old-fashioned follies as family-trees ?'

'I wish to know,' urged Laura, with gentle persistence. 'I have an idea that my father was not legitimate, which would account in some measure for Mrs. Piers being more ready to accept Winnie for a daughter-in-law than myself.'

'Well, I believe you are right,' returned Mrs. Trent a little reluctantly, 'though it was very stupid of any one to tell you ; for at this distance of time it is really of no consequence; and people have such narrow prejudices on the subject.'

'I think they are very natural prejudices,' said Laura. 'But now that we are over that difficulty, tell me something of this grandfather of mine.'

'I do not know much, and it is so difficult to explain relationships. Let me see : you and I and Reggie all had the same great-great-grandfather ; no, he was *your* and Reggie's great-great-great-grandfather ! How awkward not to have a word in English to express all these "greats" ! This "urahn" Piers (as the Germans would say) had three sons ; you and Reggie are descended from the second, and myself from the third—that is all I know ; but I think I have heard Mr. Trent say that it was lucky

for Reginald that your grandfather Geoffrey never married. Now, are you satisfied ?'

'I am.' She paused, and resumed in a few moments in an altered, pained tone : 'Do you know anything of my grandmother ?'

'Very little. She was a French Canadian, you know. Your grandfather was one of the unlucky Peninsular men who were sent off to America and so missed Waterloo. I rather fancy she was of humble birth ; at any rate, he never married her—more shame for him ! But I see these historical reminiscences vex you. I imagined you had more sense ; do not give it another thought. It is such an old story, no one knows anything about it ; you are just one of the family, no matter the exact degree.'

'But I am not. I can claim no tie with you. My only relatives are Winnie and her brothers.'

'Come ! you must admit *my* claim,' said Mrs. Trent kindly and pleasantly. 'We shall all be ambitious to call you cousin when you have reached the position to which your ability entitles you. I assure you I heard high praise of your talent a few days ago.'

'Where ?' exclaimed Laura in genuine surprise.

'At Mrs. Piers's, the dowager's. Mr. Trent and I were dining with her, to meet Reginald and a very charming Madame Moscynska, some relation of one of their Saltshire neighbours. She said she thought your work full of promise, and was sure you would yet take high rank ; she seemed to understand what she was talking about. She is rather a remarkable woman, and quite fascinated Mr. Trent.'

'I am much obliged for her prophecy,' said Laura gravely.

'Her toilette is a study,' continued Mrs. Trent ; 'only it suggests the idea of too elaborate care. Mrs. Piers told me that Madame Moscynska wished to make my acquaintance, which rather surprised me ; I should have imagined that quite professional people like ourselves were not likely to attract a fine lady such as she is. However, I called on her yesterday, or rather left my card, for she was out.'

Laura listened with an odd feeling of displeasure and

uneasiness that made her vexed with herself. Why should she not like the idea of acquaintanceship between her pleasant friendly relative and the Polish princess ? Why did she suspect Mrs. Trent, in her heart, of a weakness for grandees, albeit so frankly accepting her excellent middle-class position ? It was one of those strange currents of thought, different in temperature and of contrary direction from the surrounding mental condition, which at times traverse it.

'And Miss Trent's pretty things ? You were so good as to say you would show them to me,' she said, rousing herself and resolutely turning away from the subjects of which they were speaking.

'Yes ; I shall be delighted. It is like being married over again, having the care of all these fine things,' said Mrs. Trent, laughing. 'Really, Reginald's gift is quite splendid—a lovely dessert service of silver and engraved glass ! I believe, as Mrs. Piers could not come to town, Madame Moscynska helped him to choose it—she has perfect taste.'

Of course Mrs. Crewe was ravenous for a description of the preparations for Miss Trent's wedding, and delivered a carefully-considered opinion that Laura would have done more wisely, and upheld her own position better, had she accepted Mrs. Trent's invitation to the ceremony.

'You are one of the family, my dear. Why should you not be one of the guests at your cousin's wedding ? Your absence is a sort of admission that you are scarcely a relative.'

'I really do not care whether I am or not,' returned Laura, laughing ; 'not enough, certainly, to expend the cost of a wedding garment.'

'My dear Laura,' said the Admiral, 'the claims of kindred should not be lightly disregarded. The family is a divine institution, and the right to belong to one ought not to be thoughtlessly relinquished.'

'If I have a right I should certainly not give it up,' returned Laura, smiling slightly—a peculiar smile, that seemed to fix the Admiral's attention, for he continued to look at her with a questioning expression for another second.

'I am sure a new summer dress would not ruin you, Laura,' observed Mrs. Crewe, coming in with her blessed undercurrent of commonplace to sweep away the pin's point of light that for an instant gleamed on the Admiral's brain. 'If Mrs. Reginald Piers comes to town you will want a change ; you cannot go about with her in your old black dress for ever.'

'We shall see,' returned Laura, evading the discussion ; and then she led the conversation to her visits of that morning, and the satisfaction she experienced in finding that she had lost very little by her prolonged visit to Pierslynn. Finally, the Admiral requested her to put on her hat and mantle, as they would not be too early for the charitable tea.

It was a somewhat long expedition to the north-eastern district. The evening was close and thunderous, and the room, though large, was crammed with not too well-washed boys and girls and tiny urchins, so that Laura found the atmosphere rather overpowering.

In spite of haste, the Admiral and his ward were a few minutes late, but the former was sufficiently important to be waited for. Directly they had penetrated to the top of the room, Laura was given a seat among the leading female members of the congregation, while her guardian was invited to 'step up' on the platform. A broad-shouldered big man, with well-flattened, whity-brown hair, who had apparently twisted a small table-cloth round his huge throat, said, 'Let us join in prayer.' Whereupon every one knelt down.

After this the distribution of viands began, and Laura grew interested in helping the little street-Arabs to buns and bread-and-butter, and watching their weird, prematurely old faces.

The excitement and bustle were tremendous. The steam of many tea-kettles, added to the heat of the crowded room, made the atmosphere overpowering, and by the time the Admiral rose to address the meeting Laura felt faint and dizzy. She managed to find a seat near the principal entrance, and waited with the trepidation which generally attends any public effort on the part of one dear to the listener.

At first the kindly gentleman was a little indistinct and hesitating ; but soon warming with his subject, and deeply impressed with its importance, his voice grew firm, his language fluent, and his face lighted up with the consciousness of the blessed message he was empowered to deliver.

Seeing him thus secure of his audience, Laura, leaning back in her chair, her head resting against the wall, her hat supported on her knee, gradually lost sight of the present and the preacher. Her conversation with Mrs. Trent came back to her vividly, word for word, and this her first attempt to test the truth of the strange communication from 'our Antipodes' so far confirmed it. Her heart beat suffocatingly at the idea of the bitter contempt which must replace her old admiration should this strange story prove true ; and if it did, what could she do ? Rob Winnie and her boy of their means of existence ? Submit to the shameful wrong practised upon herself ? Both seemed equally impossible. And would Winnie ever believe her husband guilty ? Laura must, by asserting herself, lose both friends. But it remained to be seen if this horrible, distressing tale were true. Before a week was over she would quietly examine into the facts communicated, and she almost prayed they would prove false. Then her thoughts grew confused — her brain seemed to burn. She saw Winnie, sorrowful, reproachful, sobbing out with tears, 'Is this revenge or justice ?' or, worse, turning revolted from her husband, their love and confidence shattered. And this would be her work.

The place swam before her—a painful rushing noise sounded in her ears, a dark film spread over her eyes. She had been greatly tried during the last three days, and she was obliged to ponder these things in her heart, without the relief of confession or sympathy. It was a strain to which her strength was not equal. The platform and her guardian's figure grew dim and indistinct, a terrible consciousness that she was helpless even to ask help oppressed her, when some one touched her. A voice said, ' You are ill—let me help you out,' and a strong arm was round her. The next moment she felt a delicious current of fresh air, and, coming to herself, she found Denzil Crewe

and a large goodnatured-looking woman in a big bonnet with funereal feathers, beside her in an outer chamber or vestibule.

'You are all right now?' asked Denzil, whose eyes were fixed upon her with much eager anxiety, while he held a glass of water in his hand. 'Take a little more water.'

'Did I faint?' asked Laura. 'I cannot remember.'

'Very nearly. We just managed to get you out. As soon as you are able to stand, we will go home.'

'The heat and the emotion were no doubt too much for the young lady. It was a touching spectacle, and the excellent Admiral had improved the opportunity so admirably,' said the lady in the befeathered bonnet.

Laura turned and thanked her for her attention.

'Do you think you can venture to walk a little way?' asked Denzil, who seemed impatient to be gone.

'Yes. Oh yes! I should like to go home.'

Denzil took out his card-case and scribbled a few lines on the back of a card.

'May I ask you to send this card to Admiral Desbarres as soon as he has finished speaking?'

This the lady promised to do; then arranging her hat and hair as well as she could, by a hand-glass brought her by the friendly matron, Laura took Denzil's arm, and they sallied forth.

'I am afraid cabs are not easily to be found here,' said Denzil, looking round, 'and I am sure you are scarcely able to stand. I am surprised you could hold out as long as you did in such an atmosphere.'

'It was very oppressive, certainly,' returned Laura. 'Still, I do not understand being so faint; I never felt faint before.'

'I am quite sure your visit to Pierslynn has done you no good,' rejoined Denzil rather gruffly; 'you look a different creature from what you were when I came back.'

'I am feeling quite strong now,' returned Laura.

'Nonsense,' said Denzil, more earnestly than politely; 'you are still very shaky. Let us turn down this street to the left. I scarcely know my bearings, but I imagine it leads towards Gray's Inn Lane.'

'Gray's Inn Lane?' repeated Laura, struck by the name; 'whereabouts is that?'

'It is a long way from this, I fear; it leads, you know, from Holborn to the Great Northern; it is full of lawyers and legal gentry. Hallo! there's a cab! Stand here an instant—I will catch it;' and he darted away, returning soon with the captured fourwheeler.

The drive back was rather silent, and seemed to Laura interminable. When at length they reached Leamington Road, Collins announced that 'Missus was gone out with Miss Brown.'

'Very well—all right, Collins,' said Denzil, and Collins disappeared. 'The mother seems to have gone off on a private spree. I am glad you will be looking better by the time she comes in. She would have been startled if she saw your white face.'

'I am really quite recovered,' returned Laura, rising and speaking as bravely as she could. But the weak flesh failed to support the willing spirit; even in uttering the words her voice broke, and she burst into irrepressible tears.

'Sit down again,' cried Denzil, taking her hand and drawing her back to the sofa. 'If you go away upstairs by yourself, you will be fainting when you are alone, and God knows what! I wish my mother were here!' He stopped, looked with a rueful expression at Laura, who felt terribly ashamed of herself; and then he began to walk up and down the room in a troubled fashion. 'I wish you wouldn't cry like that,' he exclaimed at last; 'it is awful. Look here, Laura! if there is anything vexing you—anything on your mind, you know—just tell me; look on me as a brother. I would do all in my power to help you. Something extraordinary must have happened to distress you. This is not like your usual strength and self-control.'

'I am very much ashamed of my weakness, and of troubling you,' said Laura brokenly. 'I never behaved so badly before; the heat of that place was too much—the—'

'Yes,' interrupted Denzil, resuming his quarter-deck walk, while a cloud gathered over his brow; 'you have

overtasked your strength in every way ; you are but human, after all, Miss Piers, and your visit to Pierslynn was an imprudence—it was more than your cousin ought to have asked ; but I am probably meddling with what does not concern me. I thought—I thought you were more steeled against old impressions——’ He stopped abruptly, and stood gazing out of the window.

The extreme surprise his words caused her checked Laura’s tears, and gave a new turn to her thoughts. The friendly confidential tone in which they had of late been accustomed to treat each other prevented her from feeling that Denzil was taking a liberty in speaking thus ; but the impatience and odd irritation in his voice and manner wounded her a little ; she felt so betrayed, where she had put fullest faith, that she was more than usually disposed to cling to the kind straightforward sailor, whose friendliness appeared so brotherly and so sincere.

That he should be disposed to blame her in some inexplicable way seemed too hard.

‘I do not think I quite understand you,’ she returned, speaking more steadily. ‘I have been troubled, just lately, in a somewhat unexpected way, but my visit to Pierslynn has nothing to do with it. It is something widely different, and when I can decide how to act, I shall no doubt feel at rest. Are you displeased with me for any reason that you speak in that tone ?’

‘No,’ returned Denzil, collecting himself and stopping opposite to her. ‘I feel that I have presumed to speak as I had no right to do ; but if you knew’—he paused, and renewed his pacing to and fro—‘if you knew how much I have felt for you and with you—how sincerely I have admired your spirit, your courage, your fortitude—you would forgive me if I am angered to think that the whim of that pretty cousin of yours should have drawn you into contact with her husband and forced upon your notice the difference of your respective lots. It was impossible to suppose you were not to be shaken by such close contact with—with a fellow who was all in all to you, yet I am fool enough to be disappointed at the result.’

‘I hardly understand you,’ repeated Laura, growing red and indignant ; yet she *did* understand even more

than he intended. ‘ You have been so kind, so brotherly to me, that I feel you have a sort of right to say much ; but you are somewhat unjust and very much mistaken. I have nothing to reproach myself with ; I have simply tried to do my duty so far as I can see it. I am tired and worried, and—— But I cannot talk any longer ; I must go away and be quiet in my own room. I do not want to quarrel with you, and I shall if I stay.’

She rose and went slowly to the door. Denzil sprang forward to open it for her.

‘ I do not know how I have come to forget myself, and speak in this way. You must forgive me, Laura—Miss Piers. I have been rude, presumptuous ; but *I* too am disturbed. I made a discovery to-day that has startled me ; I feel the effects still ; it will influence my whole life perhaps—and—we are still friends, then, although I have deserved your displeasure ?’

‘ Oh yes ; very good friends, if you wish. I hope your discovery is of nothing bad for yourself or your mother ?’

‘ I hope not. One day we may exchange secrets,’ he returned. And Laura gave him a sad little smile as she passed, and hurried to her room.

‘ Good gracious !’ cried Mrs. Crewe, when she reached home about half an hour afterwards. ‘ I had no idea you would be back so early. I just took the opportunity of going with Miss Brown to see Cooke and Maskelyne, and most extraordinary they are. But I never dreamed of your being here before me. I am quite distressed to hear that Laura was not well. You were quite right to take her away at once. I am convinced she has taken cold, and I shall make her some gruel, with a little moist sugar and just a tablespoonful of brandy.’

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IT was a couple of days before Laura quite shook off the effect of her fainting-fit. In truth, her strength seemed scarcely equal to the load laid upon her, and at times the

questions, ‘What shall I do? how shall I guide myself?’ became absolute torture, so perpetual were their recurrence. Yet, amid the gravity of such thoughts she found room for a smaller annoyance, which fretted and stung her. Denzil Crewe evidently thought she was still pining in hopeless love for Reginald Piers; and she saw no means to undeceive him. On such a subject she could offer no assertions, and if she could they would not be believed. Her depression, her preoccupation, her altered mien, might all be naturally accounted for by the theory of an unrequited passion, and for many a long day to come her lips must be sealed. It was strange, how this minor matter vexed her, and revealed how surely she had trusted in her friend’s complete and sympathetic perception of her mind and character. That he should misunderstand her on such a subject seemed too hard. Meantime she determined to test the truth of the extraordinary statements contained in Holden’s letter.

Her daily occupations secured her an unusual degree of independence; it was perfectly easy to arrange *not* to give a particular lesson, and the time it would have occupied was at her disposal unquestioned. By such an arrangement she was sure of some hours of freedom one day about a week after her return from Pierslynn, and, turning her back on the scene of her daily labours, she started to seek the church named in the letter which had so changed her life.

It was a long, wearisome drive, in an omnibus filled to overflowing with a constantly fluctuating crowd of passengers, and Laura descended at the Mansion House, dusty, crushed, and with a sense of having been trampled under foot; after a moment of bewilderment she collected herself and applied for direction to a policeman. ‘St. Olave’s, miss? let me see; you had best make your way into Cannon Street, turn towards St. Paul’s Church-yard, and take the third street to the left after you pass the station. After that, you had best ask your way again.’

Laura thanked him, and turned away with an odd sense of being ashamed of herself and her errand, and a strong wish that she had worn a thicker veil.

She found her way easily enough to the opening of the narrow street indicated, and, after some further directions from a porter who was lounging at the entry of a court, made her way to a quiet nook bounded by dingy red brick houses on three sides, the fourth being occupied by a high iron railing which separated them from a space of green-sward, shaded by a large lime tree whose blackened, gnarled trunk gave little promise of the leafy crown which sheltered the enclosure. Beyond was a very old, smoke-dimmed, decrepit-looking church, and at the farther side of the little square was a small, two-storied house with a vivid green door, with a bright brass plate inscribed 'James Pratt, clerk.'

As Laura approached this door it opened, and a respectable-looking middle-aged man came forth, who asked her civilly what she wanted, listening to her reply with a slightly-surprised expression.

'The entry of a marriage in 1819 or '20,' he repeated. 'Yes, certainly, you can look at the register. I am obliged to go out, but my wife will show you the books, and the fee is eighteenpence. You can pay it when you have examined the register. Here, Sarah, I will give you the keys.'

He left the room, but soon returned with three or four ponderous keys on a rusty ring, and, after murmuring an indistinct apology about pressing business, walked off.

The wife hastily took off her apron, put on a bonnet, led the way through a wrought-iron gate, and then, unlocking the church-door with a clang, ushered Laura into the dark, damp old edifice. The earthy odour, the James I. monuments, and statues in the hideous Queen Anne style, the deserted, disused aspect of the interior, struck her with indescribable, chill melancholy.

'About what date, miss, do you want?' asked the clerk's wife, selecting a rusty key and opening an old oak press in the vestry.

'I had better look at the register for 1820,' said Laura huskily, recalling her father's age and the date of his death.

She trembled as she spoke. She was on the eve of testing the truth of the strange story which she strove to

doubt, and yet which seemed to force belief upon her. *If* it proved true, what a task lay before her!

'Will you please look yourself, miss? I am not much of a scholar, and the back of this here book is rubbed terrible.'

Between them they selected the volume, and then Laura searched nervously back from the date of her father's birth. Even at that distant epoch the quaint old church seemed to have been falling into disuse, as the marriages seemed few, considering the thickly-inhabited district around it.

Laura turned over two or three pages, and finally, among the entries in July 1820, she came to the following:—

'25th. Geoffrey Piers, gentleman, bachelor, of Llango-
gwen, residing at No. 4 Church Row, and Marie Lavelle,
also of this parish.'

Laura sat looking at the faded writing, speechless, scarce able to collect her thoughts, while her companion moved the chairs, and made a semblance of re-arranging things, in order not to leave the visitor alone with the church registers.

'I suppose I may copy this?' said Laura at last, rousing herself with an effort.

'Yes, sure, miss. I think there is a pen and ink some-
wheres about.'

'Do not trouble yourself. I have a pencil and note-
book;' and she hastily wrote down the entry.

'Thank you,' resumed Laura, when she had completed her task. 'I need trouble you no further. I suppose I can inspect the register at any time, on payment of a fee?'

'Certainly, miss; only if you come about dinner-time you are more likely to catch my husband. Really, the church is so deserted, there are no fees nor nothing, in a manner of speaking, to make a living by; people must take care of themselves.'

'No doubt,' returned Laura absently.

She strolled to the door and stood there a moment, comparing the sunshine without and the chill earthy dulness of the interior; and trying to picture the group at the communion rails at the lonely, secret wedding of her

grandfather and his Canadian wife. But why had her grandfather permitted the stigma of illegitimacy to rest on his son? What misery and injustice had arisen from this suppression of the truth!

'Good-day, miss,' said the clerk's wife, approaching to lock the doors. And Laura felt she must go forth to work out her destiny.

Issuing from the sleepy nook into the eddying rush of the main stream, Laura found herself again at the Mansion House. She was profoundly occupied with the question, should she, or should she not, finish her work by calling in Gray's Inn Lane before she returned home? She dreaded the visit, partly because she shrank slightly from venturing on such an unknown land alone, but more because she dreaded that the stranger in whose hands Holden had left his papers might cross-examine her, and extract from her anything that could disgrace Reginald. How keenly, how bitterly she felt that he was irretrievably disgraced in her own eyes; yet, at all hazards, she must shield his reputation from those of others.

What would the Admiral say? His judgment, however, would be softened by his dominant belief in the wretchedness of human nature, unassisted by divine grace. But what would Mr. Trent say, with his strict ideas of honour and integrity? How should she guide herself so as to be just, yet not pitiless?

'Why, Miss Piers, what brings *you* into the City?' said a familiar voice; and Laura, startled out of her thoughts, looked up, with a sudden sense of detection, to encounter Mr. Trent's eyes fixed on her with a look of surprise. 'I am afraid you will not find much material for art, high or low, here.'

'I am not so sure,' returned Laura, rallying her forces and shaking hands with him. 'The materials for true art abound everywhere. How is Mrs. Trent?'

'Remarkably well, I think; she says she is utterly worn out with fatigue. You know the wedding comes off on Tuesday, and the whole household is upside down with preparations.'

'I can understand that. When it is all quite over, I will come and hear about it from Mrs. Trent.'

'She is always glad to see you. Your cousin, Mrs. Piers, is coming up for the ceremony; I have just parted with Reginald. I was nearly as much surprised to see him in the City as to meet you. What shall I tell Mrs. Trent? That you have a commission to paint the Lord Mayor and Corporation?'

'Such a subject deserves a Titian, if we had one,' returned Laura, smiling. 'No; say I was making a large investment—anything you like.'

'Very well; and good-morning. I am somewhat pressed for time.'

He hurried away, and Laura went on almost blindly for a minute or two, so stunned did she feel by the notion of her narrow escape of meeting Reginald. How could she have spoken to him? Her difficulties seemed to spring up thick and fast. With a kind of desperate resolution she determined to go straight to Gray's Inn Lane and finish her task.

By the time she had found the number inscribed on Holden's letter she felt calmer, and soon discovered the name of 'Winter, accountant,' painted on the side of the doorway, with a large '2' indicating the second floor.

On reaching it she was admitted by a clerk to a dingy office, and, on asking for Mr. Winter, was shown into an inner den, where sat an elderly, grizzled, red-eyed, not too neatly attired man, who was writing at an office-table surrounded by a litter of papers.

'Miss Piers,' he said, looking at the card his clerk had given him. 'Ha! Miss Piers,' he repeated, as if trying to remember something. 'Sit down, if you please.' But Laura, who felt a quick aversion to the man and his surroundings, remained standing. 'Now,' he went on, as the clerk left the room and closed the door, 'what can we do for you?'

'I have come,' said Laura, restored by a wholesome feeling of antagonism and speaking with quiet firmness, 'to claim some papers which the late Mr. James Holden tells me, in this letter, he left in your care for me.' She opened the letter as she spoke, and took out the one enclosed and directed to 'Mr. G. Winter.'

'Oh ay; that's it. I remember now,' he returned,

looking sharply at her while he perused the letter. ‘Yes. I heard our poor friend was no more, a few days ago ; an old companion of his was here last week, to know if there were any assets, for he owed him, he said, fifty odd ; but I knew that couldn’t be, for Holden paid up everything before he started for Sydney. It was then he left the parcel you are in search of. Pray’—rising, and placing himself on a threadbare hearthrug before a rusty grate—‘how am I to know you are Miss Laura Piers ?’

‘I am sure I cannot tell,’ returned Laura, ‘if the possession of this letter, and that which I have just given you, is not sufficient proof of my identity.’

‘Hum,’ looking very earnestly at her. ‘What sort of a man was Holden ?’

‘I never saw him but once. I think he had black eyes and hair. He was rather stout, and looked as if he rode horses, or went to races.’

‘That’s him. Where was he employed ?’

‘At Messrs. Thurston and Trent’s.’

‘Good ! Do you know what the papers are ?’

‘Scarcely. They concern myself, I believe ; and possibly may not be of much value.’

‘Likely enough ! And I daresay there is no use in making much ado about nothing ; as you have brought me the man’s own letter authorising me to give them to you, the bearer, I suppose I may as well give them up. You will, I presume, pay the usual fee on delivery ?’

‘How much is it ?’ asked Laura, doubting that she had sufficient money with her, and feeling inclined to forfeit everything rather than return to the office of Mr. George Winter.

‘One guinea,’ he returned, thrusting his hands deep into his trousers-pockets.

‘I will pay it,’ said Laura shortly.

‘And give me a receipt ?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Sit down, then, while I look in the safe,’ he returned. Taking a key from a drawer in his table, he proceeded to open and examine several bundles of papers in an iron safe which stood in one corner, keeping up a running fire of comment while he did so. ‘Poor Holden ! He was a

pleasant fellow, but a trifle too fast. It's more than two years since he left that packet—(where the dickens has it got to?)—in my keeping. “Don't give it to anybody,” says he, “that hasn't a written order from me; for I know you are true blue!” Ay, I helped him out of more scrapes than one: and, between you and me, he was on the verge of “all up” when he got the pot of money that put things square. But he was uncommon close; never could find out how he came by it. It was just a month or two before he left England. Paid everything in brand-new Bank of England notes and gold; no tracing anything. Ay, here it is at last. There you are, ma'am, beating the dust off against the chimney-piece, then laying the parcel, which was wrapped in brown paper, beside his blotting-book; and, locking the safe, he took up his pen to write out a form of acquittance for Laura to sign.

She sat silent in the chair she had at last accepted, feeling as if in a dream, and looking with a sort of dread at the commonplace parcel which contained the key to the mystery. She longed, yet feared, to examine its contents, and almost trembled with eagerness to have it safe in her own possession. If this repulsive man had any idea of its contents, what a scourge he would be to Reginald!

‘Now, then, put your name there, ma'am; hand over one-one, and the papers are yours. I hope you will find them worth the money.’

‘I hope so,’ returned Laura carelessly, as she rose, read over the receipt he had written, and signed her name to it; finally she laid the desired one-pound-one upon the table.

‘All right,’ said Mr. Winter, scrutinising the coin severely. ‘I am happy to hand you over this parcel, and should the relatives, heirs, executors, or assigns make any opposition or inquiry, you will bear me harmless.’

‘I feel sure no one has any interest in the documents, whatever they may be, save myself.’

‘Very well; wish you a good-morning.’

‘Thank you,’ said Laura, bowing as she moved towards the door.

‘And,’ continued Mr. Winter, who seemed loth to let her go, ‘my clerk's fee is half-a-crown.’

'Indeed,' replied Laura, continuing her retreat before he could interpose between her and the exit, but without again opening her purse till the pale and grimy lad in the first room opened the outer door and stood with it in his hand, when in passing she bestowed the stipulated half-crown on him, saying, 'Mr. Winter tells me that is your fee.'

The astonishment depicted in his face enlightened Laura a good deal as to the legality of the fees demanded.

Though the interview had seemed long, it had not really occupied much time, and it was barely half-past three when she escaped into the open air and the busy obscurity of the streets. She felt strangely nervous, ready to start at her own shadow. What if she met Reginald bound upon the same errand as herself? for perhaps he knew of Holden's death and the existence of these letters. She must command herself, and strive with her unassisted judgment to decide on the most prudent and least vindictive plan of proceeding.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ON this particular day Laura was delighted to find herself in excellent time for the evening meal, and passed to her own room unquestioned and unsuspected, her precious packet concealed in a large roll of drawing-paper.

'That's right, dear,' said Mrs. Crewe, opening the dining-room door. 'I was just beginning to hope you would not be late: it has been *so* warm, and you look so tired and dusty and worn-out, it gives me a pain in the back to look at you.'

'Then I will hide myself as soon as I can,' returned Laura, running upstairs.

Her first care was to put away the parcel in her safest box, which had a patent lock. Then she sat down to rest and breathe, while memory raised the curtain of the past.

Scarce two years ago she had sat and thought in that very room, almost dazed by the sudden flood of love and light and

intolerable joy that had broken in upon her. Alas ! was it all a gigantic sham ? Yet in the old times, when neither had a thought of the future or its possibilities, she had been Reginald's chosen friend and confidante ! There was a certain amount of sympathy and mutual comprehension between them which nothing could quite uproot. What a martyrdom she had endured since those days of dazzling delight ! and she was there still, living, breathing ; her own self not crushed out of mental form and intelligence, but calm, resigned ; not incapable of enjoyment in some directions, but at present somewhat overweighted with the task that lay before her ; for she could not, must not, allow Reginald to go altogether unpunished.

Yet how could she strike him without hurting innocent, unsuspecting Winnie ? She could not answer the question. She must first acquaint herself with the contents of Holden's packet—and then ? She found no convenient conclusion, so proceeded to make a more than usually careful toilette, in order to avert attention from her worn, weary aspect.

Both the Admiral and Denzil were waiting when she entered the drawing-room, and she apologised in some confusion for her unusual want of punctuality.

When dinner was over the *partie carrée* assembled in the drawing-room, and Laura observed that the Admiral seemed unusually disposed to talk. He had met an old shipmate that day who had been 'interviewing' one of the Lords of the Admiralty on behalf of his son, a young lieutenant, and this opened up a long vista of bygone days. The Admiral was deeply interested in his old friend's son, and announced his intention of speaking to certain influential personages in his favour.

Mrs. Crewe listened with much attention and approval, and did not fail to observe with a sigh that she wished his interest could be employed in favour of her dear boy.

The 'dear boy,' meantime, lay back easily in his chair, apparently lost in thought, and Laura was glad to be silent, and occupied with some ornamental work destined for Mrs. Crewe.

Presently their neighbour, Mr. Brown, joined them with a *Times* in his hand, to talk over an important City article with Denzil. But Denzil was not disposed to talk, so Mr.

Brown, nothing loth, turned to the Admiral, and they were soon deep in an argument on the amount of benefit really derived by society from what is usually termed progress.

'Play us something, Laura dear,' said Mrs. Crewe, who did not care for conversation of this description.

Laura silently went to the piano, and began to play from memory the old airs and dreamy cradle-songs that she knew her listeners liked. While she did so she remembered that she had scarcely exchanged a word with Denzil since the evening when he had spoken to her so harshly. The absorbing interest of her search for the documents indicated by Holden had thrust it back among the stores of memory, but not obliterated it. She hoped he did not think she had avoided him because she was offended ; she had been a little hurt at his tone, but even that had passed away ; she would not easily let so good and pleasant a friend go ; so she thought within herself while she touched softly, tenderly, the pathetic notes of 'Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon.'

'We have been quite strangers for the last week,' said Denzil's voice suddenly, close behind her. 'I know you are above small spite of all kinds, yet whether you intended it or not, I have felt it punishment.'

'That is your own fancy,' she returned, 'certainly not my intention. We are both too busy for imaginary wrongs.'

'And too true, I hope,' he added.

Denzil came a step forward and leant against the end of the piano.

'I found a book to-day I have heard you express a wish to read, so I have brought it to you. Freytag's last volume.'

'Is it for a peace-offering ? that was not needed,' said Laura, looking up with one of her brief sweet smiles. 'Yet I thank you heartily, and accept it willingly.'

'That's right,' returned Denzil, looking pleased. 'I wish I could read German.'

'It is not so difficult; I think I could teach you.'

'Do not tempt me,' he returned, his deep dark eyes lighting up with a kindly glance. 'For me, it would be waste of time. Lives like mine are too full of indispensable work to allow of excursions into pleasant byways. I

must stick to the main road if I mean to accomplish what I want.'

'And what do you want?' ceasing to play, and looking up at him with interest.

'Independence and a fair position.'

'Yes, and you will win it. Men have the game in their hands. But what uphill work it is for a woman to make a place in this crowded world!'

'I daresay it is; but women have men to work for them.'

'Sometimes. The time is going by for that. Do not suppose I am too self-asserting, but when you think of the hundreds of women who cannot possibly find men to work for them, you must admit we have a right to help ourselves if we can.'

'Perhaps so; the mere fact of increasing population creates great changes.'

'Work is no hardship,' said Laura; 'it is often the highest pleasure.'

'Your work—yes,' he returned. 'But think of sewing long seams and things the livelong day.'

'True; the lot of some is very hard. Where is my book?'

'Here,' said Denzil, turning to a side-table and taking up a parcel that lay there.

'You are really very good and kind to me.'

'Then you give me plenary absolution?'

'You do not need it.'

'Thank you.'

There was a pause; Laura resumed her playing, and Denzil stood still by the piano, leaning on the end and looking down into the face of the musician.

'I had a visit from your young cousin, Herbert Fielden, at the office this morning,' resumed Denzil. 'He was on his way to Pierslynn, and had some business in the City. I like the youngster—there is something kindly and frank about him, and he has a look of his beautiful sister. He hankers still after the sea; but I fancy Mrs. Piers of Pierslynn would scarcely care to have a merchant skipper for a brother.'

'I cannot tell—there is no pretension about Winnie; she is very true and real.'

'Yes; but remember she has another self to influence her now, and one more alive to appearances than she is. Herbert tells me his sister is coming to town for Miss Trent's wedding. It is to take place immediately, is it not ?'

'Next week, I believe. I did not expect to have the pleasure of seeing Winnie so soon again.'

'It is a great pleasure, I suppose,' said Denzil, looking at her keenly. 'Unbelievers do say there is no such thing as female friendship, but I think Mrs. Piers and you are very fast friends.'

'I think we are, and so long as I am sure of my own friendships I do not care to generalise on the subject.'

'Have you been working at South Kensington since you returned ?'

'Not yet; to-morrow is a students' day, and I think of copying there in the afternoon; there are some bits of Danby's I should like to get hold of.'

'If I can leave the City in tolerable time I will come and see what you are doing—that is, if I may ?'

'Of course; I shall be glad to know what you think of my work; you have a very good eye for colour, considering.'

'That is encouraging! You are feeling all right again, Miss Piers ? quite recovered that attack ?'

'Yes, quite.'

'Yet you are not looking yourself.'

'I should be very pleased to be some one else could I choose. Yet no! it would be base and cowardly to shrink from one's own personality.'

'Laura!' said the Admiral suddenly, 'may I trouble you to bring me a small parcel of papers tied with black ribbon which lies beside my desk ? These reports, my dear sir, will show you the difficulties our association has had to contend with.'

And Laura's *tête-à-tête* with Denzil was over.

When she escaped to her own room it was nearly ten o'clock, and having locked her door and shaded the light, she drew forth the packet she had purchased that day, determined to master its contents before she slept. But

must stick to the main road if I mean to accomplish what I want.'

'And what do you want?' ceasing to play, and looking up at him with interest.

'Independence and a fair position.'

'Yes, and you will win it. Men have the game in their hands. But what uphill work it is for a woman to make a place in this crowded world!'

'I daresay it is; but women have men to work for them.'

'Sometimes. The time is going by for that. Do not suppose I am too self-asserting, but when you think of the hundreds of women who cannot possibly find men to work for them, you must admit we have a right to help ourselves if we can.'

'Perhaps so; the mere fact of increasing population creates great changes.'

'Work is no hardship,' said Laura; 'it is often the highest pleasure.'

'Your work—yes,' he returned. 'But think of sewing long seams and things the livelong day.'

'True; the lot of some is very hard. Where is my book?'

'Here,' said Denzil, turning to a side-table and taking up a parcel that lay there.

'You are really very good and kind to me.'

'Then you give me plenary absolution?'

'You do not need it.'

'Thank you.'

There was a pause; Laura resumed her playing, and Denzil stood still by the piano, leaning on the end and looking down into the face of the musician.

'I had a visit from your young cousin, Herbert Fielden, at the office this morning,' resumed Denzil. 'He was on his way to Pierslynn, and had some business in the City. I like the youngster—there is something kindly and frank about him, and he has a look of his beautiful sister. He hankers still after the sea; but I fancy Mrs. Piers of Pierslynn would scarcely care to have a merchant skipper for a brother.'

'I cannot tell—there is no pretension about Winnie; she is very true and real.'

the London post-mark, and was dated 'July 28, 1820.' The address inside was 'Church Row,' and the date, written in old-fashioned style, 'This 28th of July 1820.'

The letter began, 'Dear and respected Friend,' and proceeded to say that they (her husband and herself) had changed their plans, and instead of returning, as her former letter stated, on the following Wednesday, would remain a week longer in town, as her dear husband (the new title was repeated as often as possible) wished she should see some of the sights in the great metropolis, especially as she felt so much stronger and better than when she left Llanogwen.

'The feeling that I can stand by my husband's side in the face of the world seems to give me new life,' she continued. 'And it need never harm him, for I do not want to intrude upon his proud people, only to be his true wife and helper, in peace and obscurity, in your pretty, pleasant home. How can I ever thank you enough, dear Mrs. Pryce, for all your goodness! I know it was your excellent advice decided Geoffrey to follow the inclination of his own kind heart. You are a mother to me—the only mother I ever knew! Mine has been such a lonely life. I so wished you had been with me at church; I had no one but the clerk and the woman of the house where we lodge. Though I was so happy, I could not keep back my tears, and when I repeated after the pastor, "Till death us do part," I felt a sudden chill, as though the parting was not far off. You will scold me for this, dear friend, but now I feel quite gay and hopeful. I shall remember your advice, and take great care of my marriage certificate till I can give it to you to keep. I am writing while my husband is gone out on business, and it is the next best thing to talking with you. How much I shall have to tell you when we meet!'

Then followed some mention of the Tower and St. Paul's; of a beautiful dress her husband had given her; and then it ended with the words: 'Always your attached, MARIE PIERS.'

The tears rose to Laura's eyes as they perused these lines; she wondered that a French Canadian, as her grandmother seemed to have been, could write such good English.

She had evidently received some cultivation. But conjectures were fruitless. She folded up the letter and took up a small slip of paper, which certified—‘That it appears by the Register of Marriages, kept for the Parish of St. Olave's [City], in the borough of —, that Geoffrey Piers and Marie Lavelle were married, the twenty-fifth day of July, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and twenty.

‘Witness my hand this twenty-fifth day of July 1820.

‘T. LAWRENCE, Vicar.’

One more letter, dated October 1820, from Chester, described the writer as not much the better for the change, and very anxious to return to Llanogwen, as Mr. Piers would be obliged to go to his cousin's place at Pierslynn. Mrs. Piers was always very fond of him, and she was ill; and the writer adds: ‘I could not bear Geoffrey's absence, unless I were with you. He is so kind and gentle; how shall I ever leave him?’

Finally, in a rude round hand on a piece of ruled paper, that looked as if it had been torn out of an account-book, was written as follows:

‘This letter, October 27, was the last she wrote me, poor dear. She never left me again till she went to a better world, the 9th of January following, just a fortnight after her little boy was born: I had him christened Edward, in our parish church, as I knew his father was a prelatist; but he was too distraught, poor gentleman, with grief, to know or care what I did. I loved that boy, and had the sole care of him for five years. Mr. Piers paid me regularly, and came often to see him. At last he took him away somewhere that he might be properly educated; so I lost my little darling. I had a few letters from Mr. Piers telling me how the boy got on; but now it is nigh six years since I had any tidings, and I do not expect ever to see or hear anything more of Mr. Piers or his dear boy; but so long as I live I will keep these papers, and I charge my nephew, James Holden, to do the same, as there is no knowing when they may be of use to the boy.

DEBORAH PRYCE.

‘Sept. 14, 1831.’

This was all. What the legal value of these letters might be Laura could not tell ; to her they were proof positive. Indeed, she could not conceive a doubt existing as to her right to the family estate. Still to attack Reginald, although he had wronged and robbed her, was beyond her strength ; to submit to such a wrong with her eyes open was not to be thought of. At last a resolution slowly formed itself in her mind ; she would wait a while, and then she would speak to him alone. Having shown her full knowledge of his treachery, she would come to some terms with him by which he should be neither beggared nor disgraced. This was all she could decide, and so, after a long, unprofitable reverie, she folded up the packet again, tied it carefully, locked it away, and went to bed, where, to her own surprise, she slept profoundly, having been much exhausted by the fatigue and excitement of the day.

The waking next morning, the going about her usual work, the interest and vexations of teaching, the writing a receipt for some small payment, all seemed strange and difficult to her.

She was unworldly enough, and very little inclined to cynicism or morbidness of any description, yet she could not help smiling as she thought of her social experience. She had learned so deeply the lesson of her own insignificance ; not that she was annoyed by it : the few she loved, loved her ; but to the world—the general world—she knew she was just a praiseworthy ‘young person,’ who maintained herself, and could draw a little. Even of those who cared most for her, which of them recognised the power, the capability, that was in her ? Suppose she stood revealed before them as the mistress of a fine estate, the patroness of a couple of livings, the possessor of the power money always gives : with what sympathetic respect she would be spoken to, with what consideration she would be treated !

She smiled, quite kindly, at the idea ; after all, of those she knew, the one who seemed to know her best was Denzil Crewe. He said little on the subject, but the habit he had of listening to her opinions, the very way in which he opposed them, proved a degree of appreciation she had never met from any one else, not even Winnie, not even Reginald

when he was playing the lover—‘a part,’ thought Laura, with a sigh and a smile, ‘no one will ever play to me again, unless, indeed, for the same reason—my title to Pierslynn.’

The second day after Laura’s excursion into the City she was a little late for dinner, and ran up to her room to make a hasty toilette without first seeing Mrs. Crewe.

‘Come away, my dear,’ cried that lady as she entered the dining-room, where the rest were at table. ‘I am so sorry you were late to-day of all days. It is the first time I have ventured to treat you to salmon, and yours will be quite cold,’ performing a fantasia on the handbell. ‘Collins, bring—oh, you have it! Sit down, Laura, and eat your fish, while I tell you the news. Now, who do you think paid me a visit to-day?’

‘I am sure I cannot guess, Mrs. Crewe.’

‘What do you say to Winnie! Mrs. Piers of Pierslynn, herself, and the baby. She came, she said, without writing a line, just to surprise us. Collins, if you don’t mind you will drop the knives and sauce-ladle, and grease all the carpet. And a great surprise it was. She looked sweet, in *such* a bonnet and cloak and dress! Madame Elise, my dear; no mistaking her style. She is just the same dear, warm-hearted, charming creature as ever. Is she not, Admiral?’

‘Very interesting and worthy of affection, indeed,’ he returned.

‘When did they come to town?’ cried Laura.

‘Only yesterday; was it not kind and friendly of her to come out here so soon? The baby is a beautiful little darling, but delicate.’

‘Did you look at the baby, dear Admiral?’ asked Laura, with a smile.

‘Yes, I *looked* at it; but these poor little creatures are beyond my comprehension,’ he returned.

‘Its limbs are not at all what they ought to be,’ resumed Mrs. Crewe authoritatively. ‘But what eyes the precious dear has! The exact model of its mother’s. Do you know, my sweet Toppy was quite jealous to see the baby in my arms. She jumped on the small round table, and sat there straight up, with her pretty toes together,

giving a little croak now and then in a most intelligent manner. Denzil, would you cut a slice of cold beef for Toppy?’

‘How long did Winnie say she was going to stay in town?’

‘She did not say, but I fancy they will be here some weeks. She seemed so bright and happy, and said how she enjoyed your visit, Laura. She got well from the time you arrived.’

‘I have no doubt yours is a healing influence,’ said Denzil, smiling; ‘though you and Mrs. Piers are so unlike in nature, I do not quite understand your being such great friends.’

‘That is just it,’ said Laura. ‘Our angles fit into each other; were they a shade nearer they might graze.’

‘Mrs. Piers wrote a little note for you, Laura; it is in the drawing-room.’

An announcement which made the rest of dinner seem very long, especially as the Admiral was disposed to talk, and Mrs. Crewe did not like to move.

‘Well, dear, what does she say?’ asked Mrs. Crewe, when they had escaped the dining-room, the Admiral having ascended to his own chamber, and Denzil producing an evening paper, while Laura read her note.

‘She begs me to go to her early to-morrow and spend the day.’

‘Will you go?’ asked Denzil quickly.

‘Oh yes, of course! Then I can tell her of my engagements, and she will see that I cannot be with her every day.’

‘I daresay her own engagements will be so numerous that she may not want to see you every day,’ he returned.

‘Very likely,’ said Laura calmly; ‘our paths lie wide apart. Still, it is very pleasant to catch a glimpse of each other now and then.’

Denzil made no answer, and Mrs. Crewe took up her parable.

‘No doubt it is, Laura dear; and very right and natural. I am sure it is highly to your credit having kept up your friendship with young Mrs. Piers so steadily. I wonder if Mr. Reginald Piers will ever honour me by calling again?’

I used to be all and all with him, but I daresay he would feel awkward now. I must say my opinion of that young man is considerably changed, and he must know it.'

'All that is past and gone,' said Laura very gravely and composedly. 'I daresay he has nearly forgotten the terrible mistake he had almost made. Let us forget it too.'

'It would certainly be in better taste to do so,' said Denzil emphatically.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

'I SHALL be all alone to-day,' said Mrs. Crewe, as she and Laura returned to the dining-room the following morning after attending the Admiral to the door as usual. 'Denzil started quite an hour ago to catch the 9.30 train to Isleworth. He is invited to spend the day with Mr. Gibbon, the senior partner, who has a lovely place in the country. Very flattering, I am sure.' Then, after a pause, she resumed confidentially: 'Mr. Gibbon has a very nice daughter, I am told, highly accomplished and very pretty. Now, it has struck me that all the attention Denzil has received from the family of late may possibly mean that he would not be unacceptable as a son-in-law.'

'Perhaps so,' said Laura.

'My son may not be a wealthy man,' continued Mrs. Crewe, with dignity, 'but he has birth and high character, good looks, and, though I say it, first-rate abilities; it is my impartial opinion that the girl who gets my Denzil may bless her stars.'

'I am sure he would be the best possible husband,' returned Laura cordially. 'And now I must go too, as Winnie wants me to be with her early. But I will come back in time for tea, Mrs. Crewe, and go to church with you in the evening.'

Winnie was writing when Laura entered, and sprang up to meet her with her usual affectionate warmth.

'I am so delighted to see you, dear! I was sure you would come early. I want so much to have a nice talk with you before Reginald comes back; he said he would

come in to luncheon. How have you been, Laura? You do not look as well as you did at Pierslynn.'

'I daresay not. London is so warm and exhausting; but I am quite well.'

'I have a note for you from Mrs. Piers. She wants you to dine with her on Wednesday. You must come with me, dear. She is very nice in her own house, and you will like her.' And Laura, after some hesitation, agreed.

While they still spoke the door was thrown open, and a waiter announced 'Colonel Bligh.'

A tall, soldierly-looking man entered and advanced to shake hands with Winnie. He was very sunburnt, with thick dark moustaches, abundant black hair just touched with gray, and keen, red-brown eyes.

'Hadn't the least idea you were in town till Piers looked me up this morning. Very glad to see you so blooming.'

He shook hands with Winnie as he spoke, and darted one quick, inquiring glance at Laura.

He was followed in another moment by Reginald, who was, Laura at once noticed, looking brighter and better than when she last saw him. He was evidently much surprised at finding her with his wife, but assumed an air of great cordiality.

'Ah, Laura, delighted to see you! I was going to try if I should have better luck to-day than Winifrid had yesterday, for I know you stay at home on Sunday. And how have you been since you deserted Pierslynn?'

The blood went back to Laura's heart with a suffocating sensation as he spoke. Was it possible that this handsome, debonair gentleman, with his cordial, winning grace of manner, was a cheat—an impostor? Surely he was belied. He could not have played so base a part. She grew deadly pale, and it was a moment before she could control herself enough to reply.

'I am sure you were better at Pierslynn,' continued Reginald, looking at her earnestly. 'I cannot say London agrees with you.'

'Nor can I either!' exclaimed Winnie. 'Let me present Colonel Bligh to you, Laura. Miss Piers—Colonel Bligh.'

'Come, Laura, you have no wine. You must take a glass with me,' cried Reginald at luncheon. 'Hock to Miss Piers. I know you like the Rhine wines. What have you been doing since you came back to town? Has the Admiral been taking you to too many prayer-meetings? or have you been working too hard? Ah, Laura,' lowering his voice, while Winnie and Colonel Bligh were laughing over some mutual acquaintances, 'you are not made for this dull, hard life. You must cut London and come to us. Why, Winnie will scarce ever feel any place home without you.'

Laura raised her eyes and looked straight at him for the first time since he came into the room.

'Thank you,' she said slowly and coldly; 'you are very good.'

Something in her tone, in her eyes, suddenly chilled Reginald's warm hospitality. He looked away, a quick, uneasy frown contracted his brow for an instant, and he turned from Laura to join abruptly in the conversation of the others, but soon again addressed her.

'And what does the Admiral do with himself?'

'He is always busy. He has joined a sect of benevolent people, and has quantities of business to do, examining into cases and visiting districts.'

'Happy are the rogues and vagabonds whose cases are inquired into by our good old friend!' exclaimed Reginald, laughing. 'I imagine it requires no great skill to throw dust in his eyes.'

'I am not so sure,' said Laura. 'I imagine he often sees more and deeper than we think; only his goodness is of the order that shines equally on the evil and the good.'

'That is exceedingly immoral,' said Colonel Bligh gravely.

'It must be horribly difficult to find out who is deserving and who is not,' observed Winnie; 'and while one is trying to find out, some good creatures may die of starvation!'

'I say, Piers, you must take Mrs. Piers down to Goodwood. The races come off on Friday next. Let us make up a party. There is Mrs. Compton, a capital little

woman, a sort of relation of mine—(she is going to call upon you, Mrs. Piers, if you will allow her)—she would like to come, and some of her following. By the bye, our old friend Madaine Moscynska is staying with her.'

At the mention of this name Winnie's big eyes lit up with a startled angry look. She did not reply immediately, and Reginald said quickly :

'By all means. Mrs. Piers has lost both Epsom and Ascot. She ought to see Goodwood—eh, Winnie ?'

'I thought Madame Moscynska had gone abroad ?' she said slowly.

'She *said* she was going, at any rate,' returned Reginald easily. 'But we know "how light a cause may move" that fair lady to change her plans.'

'As to the lightness of the cause, it is impossible to say,' remarked Colonel Bligh. 'She likes to be suspected of being a political agent—a sort of pale phantom of the celebrated Princess Lieven. She is deuced clever, and one of the most eloquent listeners I ever met.'

'What a curious phrase, Colonel Bligh !' exclaimed Winnie.

'I mean, she has a way of appearing so absorbed in what you are saying to her—if you are at all worth the trouble)—that a man begins to think himself no end of a *raconteur*, and that she must be a highly-gifted woman to have found it out.'

'Exactly,' said Winnie quietly, though her colour rose, 'quite clever enough to make unpleasant use of the admissions or revelations her eloquent listening may have led you on to make.'

'Come, Mrs. Piers, that is too severe. Angelic women like you ought to leave sarcasm to poor commonplace, worldly mortals.'

'By Jove ! it is too bad,' cried Reginald, with rather a forced laugh. 'You must know that when we first met Princess Moscynska in Paris, Mrs. Piers being quite inexperienced in all matters appertaining to the higher regions and mysteries of the toilette, Madame took her in hand. I must say she had an apt pupil. My wife soon found she could go alone, considerably before Madame Moscynska recognised the fact, and hence the blood-feud which exists

between them ; more on our side, I confess, than on the arch-offender's.'

'I am not surprised at the "Moscynska" being distanced,' said Colonel Bligh, with a bow and look of unmistakable admiration ; 'she is much too heavily weighted for competition with such an opponent.'

'Well, well, you will see about Goodwood,' cried Reginald impatiently.

Winnie did not speak, and Laura felt a new light—a very unpleasant light—dawning upon her.

'I suppose your sister, Lady Jervois, will be in town to-morrow or next day?' said Winnie to her husband.

'I am afraid not ; I forgot to mention that my mother had a letter from Helen, and Jervois has caught a chill. He was chopping wood or digging potatoes, or some such amusement, and got overheated, so there is no chance of Helen coming up till her lord and master is all right.'

'I am so sorry,' cried Winnie ; 'not so much for Sir Gilbert, I confess, but I do like Helen. Do you know Lady Jervois, Colonel Bligh ?'

'No, I have never met her ; but I have heard Markham—you know Markham of the —th Dragoon Guards—talk of her. He says she was a perfect pocket Venus when she first came out.'

'Poor Nelly ! how changed she is ! Yes, Markham was awfully spoony on Helen. But he had no money, so he wisely sheered off.'

'He has come into something since, has he not ?' asked Colonel Bligh. 'He was very jolly with us on board the yacht ; and, by the way, what a capital comrade the Princess was ! We missed her awfully when she left ; she kept everything ship-shape, and old Dereham could do nothing without her. She tells me she is going down to keep house for him in August ; if so, I think I will accept shooting-quarters there.'

'You had better come to Pierslynn,' said Reginald ; 'I think I can offer you good sport.'

Somewhat to Laura's surprise, this invitation met with no seconding from Winnie, who seemed in deep thought, and soon after said :

'Laura, shall we go into the next room ? Will you come

with me to Mrs. Piers? I should like to hear about Sir Gilbert, and I will set you down in Leamington Road afterwards.'

'Thank you,' said Laura.

'What are you going to do, Reginald?'

'Oh! I am not sure. Bligh and I thought of looking in on little Bob Norris. Tell you what, Winnie, if you and Laura make your way to the Zoo about four, I'll meet you there, somewhere in the aquarium.'

'Very well,' said his wife. 'Remember we dine at half-past seven with the Lloyds.'

Winnie rose and went into the next room, followed by Laura and the two gentlemen. They naturally fell into a double *tête-à-tête*, Colonel Bligh talking on smoothly and pleasantly in a lowered tone to Mrs. Piers, who, though she rewarded his efforts with occasional smiles and laughter, seemed to Laura absent and preoccupied. Reginald tried to interest Laura and himself in a discussion of her affairs.

'How is the Admiral getting on? Is there any chance of his saving anything from the wreck of that confounded company?'

'I am afraid not. He seems to have forgotten about it, and we are all very content and happy together in Mrs. Crewe's dovecot.'

'Are you?' shifting his chair to place himself between Colonel Bligh and her. 'I don't think there is another girl like you anywhere; or is your philosophy the result of compensation?'

'Has your new life so dulled your wits, Reginald, as to blind you to the conceit and presumption of such a speech?' returned Laura coolly.

'By Jove!' cried Reginald, recalled by this rebuke, 'I did not think of what I was saying; still, you are a sort of girl one does not meet every day. Winnie tells me you made no end of charming sketches at Pierslynn. I wish you would accept a commission from me, and work one of them up into a picture.'

'No, Reginald, I am too busy just now.'

'That is, you don't choose to accept anything from me,' he returned, looking at her with a curious stare, which made her angry and regretful. Angry at his effrontery,

regretful for the subtle deterioration in him, which she felt rather than observed. To turn the conversation, she remarked how well Winnie was looking.

'Yes,' replied Reginald; 'she is in great feather. Hasn't she come out, too? By George! she has a spirit of her own, but bright and true as steel. Do you know—looking down, while his face darkened—'I sometimes wish she had been less handsome and bewitching. Come along,' he exclaimed to Colonel Bligh, interrupting himself in a harsh tone. 'If we are not off we shall miss Norris.'

Colonel Bligh made his adieux with much deliberation, promised not to forget Goodwood, and, with a profound bow to Laura, followed his leader.

Winnie sat silent for a minute, while Laura watched her. At last Winnie seemed to rouse herself, and, changing her expression, exclaimed:

'He is very nice and agreeable, is he not?'

'Who—Reginald?'

'No, no—Colonel Bligh,' said Winnie, laughing. 'I flatter myself he is a great admirer of mine. Come, dear Laura, let us go and see my mother-in-law. I should like to know about poor Helen. Only fancy having to nurse Sir Gilbert! It must be an awful penance.'

The following afternoon Laura returned very warm and weary. Monday was always a day full of work, and that of the least sympathetic kind.

It was the evening of the Admiral's monthly meeting, on which occasions there was always an early dinner for him. Mrs. Crewe had gone to visit a cousin, a post-captain in the Navy, who had invited her and her son to dine with them; she had despatched a note to Denzil at his office, requesting him to join her at the Charing Cross Hotel. So Laura strolled into the little garden, where the ubiquitous Collins was hard at work with a huge watering-pot, Mrs. Crewe having carefully provided against the possibility of her finding any spare time. The little plot of garden was sweet and fresh, the spreading horse-chestnut at the far side from the house sheltering it from the sun, while Mrs. Crewe's taste and care preserved it from neglect.

Laura was glad to be alone for a while, and yet anxious

to turn her thoughts from the weary iteration that occupied and harassed them. She therefore took refuge in the book Denzil had given her—opening it with a slight sigh : ‘ How kind and thoughtful he is ! I suppose if he marries his partner’s daughter there will be no more pleasant little gifts for me ; ’ and then the feeling of how great a loss his friendship would be came upon her with a degree of pain that surprised her. She must get used to the idea, however, for some day their sympathetic companionship would cease. Would it not have been happier for Winifrid to have married Denzil ? He was so steady, and so strong. Alas ! it had come to her as a sudden revelation that Winnie was not quite happy ; there was a sort of insecurity pervading even her brightest moments, and that pregnant expression which had fallen from her lips more than once, ‘ You know we are all right *now*,’ implied so much that things were wrong once and might be again. Winnie herself was perhaps a little jealous and exacting ; yet this was quite a new development of her character. In her girlish days she was the frankest and least self-seeking of mortals.

‘ She is changed in some mysterious way ! Yet she is not so much changed as Reginald ! I fear—I fear there are many dark days before him ! Does he know of Holden’s death ? ’

Turning from her own conjectures, she resolutely fixed her eyes and thoughts on the pages of ‘ Die Brüder vom Deutschen Hause,’ and read with increasing interest and relief. She had got well into the story, though her ‘ hours of idleness ’ were few, and intended to read so long as the light lasted. But she had not been half an hour so occupied when the smell of a cigar attracted her attention, and, looking up, she saw Denzil Crewe standing on the doorstep. Their eyes met, and he came down the walk to her.

‘ I thought you had gone to dine with Mrs. Crewe at Charing Cross,’ said Laura.

‘ I thought it impossible to get away from the office in time, so I sent a line of explanation to our host, and, after all, finished my work sooner than I expected.’

‘ Mrs. Crewe will be vexed.’

‘ I hope not. I shall see these relatives another day. Do you mind my cigar ? ’

'No—I like it in the air. I sometimes think I should like to smoke too; it must be soothing when one is worried.'

'It is,' returned Denzil, sitting down beside her, 'though I hope you do not want a weed for that reason.'

'Oh! every one has their share. I have nothing especial to complain of. I have been enjoying the amusement you kindly provided for me,' and she held up her book.

'I have not seen you since yesterday morning. You spent the day with Mrs. Piers?'

'The greater part of it.'

'I went down to Mr. Gibbon's, the head of my firm. His place is rather new and bare now, but will be pretty when the trees are older.' He paused, knocked the ash off his cigar, and resumed. 'We had a long consultation—rather a serious one for me.'

'Indeed!' returned Laura, feeling a little startled, and thinking, 'Is it possible he has been proposing for the daughter?'

'It seems they are very much dissatisfied with their agent in Japan,' he continued; 'so they want me to go out and look after him. More than that—they want me to stay there for a couple of years as their representative.'

He looked up gravely into Laura's eyes as he ceased to speak.

'Your mother would be terribly cut up,' she said; 'but what do you think of it yourself?'

'It would be advantageous to me in more ways than one,' he returned; 'but I have an unusual reluctance to leave home. Still'—he paused—'I shall have time to think about it, for they await replies to their letters, which cannot arrive before a month or five weeks; and'—stealing an inquiring glance at her, which she did not observe—'we have always been friends—that is, you have been so good as to treat me as—well, as a sort of brother, that I thought I should like to talk to you about it.' He said this with a slight hesitation and diffidence that sat well upon his serious strength.

'You know I shall be pleased and interested to listen,'

replied Laura, turning to him with a sweet, frank smile.

'If I go out I shall certainly increase the stability and business of the firm, and they will give me a salary in addition to my share of the profits, besides other chances that may arise to push my fortunes. On the other hand, I dislike the idea of losing two or three years in such a remote place, after all my frequent wanderings. The firm would soon find as good an agent as I should be, and my share of profit would not be diminished were I to decline. Besides all this, I have an especial reason for wishing to stay in England, though, for the same reason, I am more anxious than ever to make money.'

'Then it is hard to decide. Your *pros* and *cons* seem so equally balanced. It would be a great disappointment to your mother were you to leave her again, and she ought to be considered.'

'Ay, she ought indeed. If she knew all my motives, however, she would, I am certain, reconcile herself to my absence.'

'Then you incline to go?'

'Yes, if I do not lose more by going than by remaining here.' He rose as he spoke, and slowly paced round the garden twice, then, throwing away the end of his cigar, he resumed his seat beside her. 'I am very anxious to make money,' said Denzil, resting one elbow on his knee and his head on his hand, speaking, as it were, out of his thoughts.

'Most men are, I suppose.'

'I am not greedy of riches; but independence, comfort, all men ought to strive for.'

'Poverty must be worse to men than women,' said Laura thoughtfully.

'I should have thought not; women want more of luxury than men; they cannot rough it like us.'

'In one sense, perhaps, but they can renounce and endure more, while the dignity of independence is more essential to men. To be master of his own life must be the object of every man; even I like to feel that I am gradually winning the command of my own.'

'Even you! Do you know, I think you have a dash of masculine spirit?'

'I do not think I have any spirit at all; but'—irresistibly impelled to make a covert approach to the ever-present topic of her thoughts—'it must be hard for a young man, full of life, of ability, conscious of birth beyond his position, yet chained down to inferiority by poverty, to resist grasping fortune, even though infringing the rights of another, another who would never miss them, and to whom he hoped to atone.'

'Is that the plot here?' said Denzil, touching her book and looking at her, a little surprised by the emotion of her tone. 'It is a very poor kind of hero that would start his career with a theft. I hope he gets properly punished in the end.'

'I have not come to the end yet,' returned Laura, accepting the shelter unconsciously offered. 'No doubt he will be.'

'I should not think you would have any compassion for a character of that kind.'

'You ought to know the whole story before you blame me,' said Laura.

'I do not think you need fear my blame,' returned Denzil, with the soft kindly smile which occasionally lent beauty to his thoughtful face.

'I am not so sure. I fear you are disposed to judge me by too high a standard, and to feel impatient with me if I fail to attain it.'

'I deny that altogether! In short, you misunderstand me.'

'It will never do to begin misunderstanding each other after being so long *en rapport*. Do not let me hear the word again,' returned Laura playfully.

'Very well,' said Denzil Crewe. 'Yet——' He stopped, and a short silence ensued. 'And how is Mrs. Piers?' he asked, breaking it suddenly.

'Remarkably well, and looking lovely.'

'No doubt,' he returned thoughtfully. 'She is lovely—that is just the word. She made a great impression on me when we first met.' He laughed slightly, and leaned back in his seat. 'I was inclined to build castles in the air respecting her; but I soon saw that was no use—saw it in time for myself.'

'Yes,' Laura exclaimed, 'I saw you were very much struck by Winnie, and at the time I wished she might love you, for I always liked you myself.'

'And don't you wish it now?' asked Denzil, a quiet smile lighting up the depths of his grave eyes.

'Ah no., How could I? No doubt everything has turned out for the best; yet she might have been very happy with you. And God only knows what is before her!'

'Ay, God knows! I am obliged to you for your good opinion so far. Tell me, Laura—Miss Piers, I mean—do you never think of yourself?'

'Yes, often—too much. Why do you ask?'

'Because I never see any trace of self-love about you.'

'But I have it, though. I have a great longing to express myself; to put what I feel and think on canvas, or on paper. I suppose you would consider it a mere foolish fancy were I to tell you how Nature seems at times to speak to me of her wrongs—of the wonderful deafness and blindness we, her creatures, are guilty of towards her—and command me to set forth her beauty, her law, her liberty?'

'It is a curious thought. I have dimly felt something of this when alone in the night-watches at sea. I suppose there is some curious affinity between us, or some of us, and physical inanimate nature. You ought to be a great artist with these ideas.'

'But I never shall be,' said Laura, with a slight sigh. 'I have at least acquired knowledge enough to be aware of the narrow limits to which I can attain; but I think I shall be able to maintain myself and enjoy. I am not sure that wealth could give me more.'

'Perhaps not. Yet it brings with it a certain amount of power; and that, to men at least, is always attractive.'

'So,' cried Mrs. Crewe to her son, when she returned at the unusually late hour of eleven, 'you were not able to come. George Fleming and his wife were so sorry. So was I. Did you get any dinner? Being Monday, I know there was not much in the house.'

Denzil assured her he had feasted in the City.

'We had an excellent dinner. They were very kind and hospitable, only I wish George Fleming had taken more interest in us twenty years ago, and had helped you into the Royal Navy.'

'All things considered, I am not sorry he left me alone,' said Denzil drily.

'But it is just the way of the world. People are always ready to show you kindness and civility when you don't want it. Are you long in, Denzil?'

'I got home about half-past seven.'

'And found every one out. Why in the world did you not come to dinner? We did not sit down till nearly seven.'

'I did not care much about it. I had a cigar in the garden and a chat with Laura.'

'Oh!—a prolonged 'Oh!' 'I really think you and Laura are growing very fond of each other's society. I begin to understand why you were too late for the Fleming's dinner;' and she nodded to her son with an indescribably knowing smile.

'Look here, mother,' said Denzil sternly, pausing in his 'quarter-deck' walk, in which he often indulged when in deep thought or confidential talk, 'you must not worry Laura with these sort of hints and innuendoes. It is seldom a fellow can have the comfort of a real, honest friendship with a sensible, noble-hearted girl like her, and I would not lose it for—well, for more than I would care to say. She is as frank, as much at ease with me, as if I had been born her brother; but if you begin to smile and nod in that fashion she will just close up like a mimosa. If I can be of any comfort or help to her, let me, and see that you do not mar the pleasure of our intercourse; promise me you will not,' pausing opposite his mother.

'My dear Denzil, you are quite awful when you assume that solemn tone. I am sure I never meant to make any mischief; one would think I was a gossiping, meddling old woman. Really, the whims and vagaries of young people nowadays are quite unaccountable; you are so over-refined and—and I don't know what. I am sure there would be no harm done if you and Laura did take a

fancy to each other. I should have no objection, and I am sure she would be a lucky girl ; but ——'

'Never mind all that,' said Denzil impatiently ; 'just promise me to put such fancies out of your head, and out of your conversation.'

'Very well,' returned his mother readily, for Denzil's serious words were law to her.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

IT was a source of the deepest pleasure to Mrs. Piers (the Dowager, as she was generally called by members of her own family) to give a little dinner.

Social distinction was very dear to her soul, and as the merely tolerated, impecunious mother-in-law of Sir Gilbert Jervois, she had had a long fast from such agreeable experiences. She was a fairly amiable, well-intentioned woman, to whom the idea of existence beyond the pale of the 'upper ten' was impossible and unendurable.

The fact that Laura bore the 'bar sinister' in her scutcheon rendered her hopelessly averse to Reginald's project of marrying his poor relation. His present wife she considered far from his equal. Still, she was the daughter of a rector, who was a scholar and a gentleman. Her mother, too, came of a respectable family, and on neither side was there any doubtfulness of character.

Young Mrs. Piers was handsome enough to become the fashion—accomplished, graceful, well-bred—so that Reginald's strange disregard of his own interest in the matter of matrimony was a little more excusable in this second choice.

In fact, his mother felt it would only be to her own disadvantage if she opposed this fancy too persistently, so she gave way frankly and graciously, and she reaped her reward, for Winifrid was a pleasant, observant daughter-in-law. Perfect peace existed between them until shortly before the birth of the son and heir, when a difference of opinion on what seemed at first a trivial matter developed itself, though at the present stage of affairs the slight estrangement was shown by occasional double-shotted

speeches and veiled allusions, chiefly understood by the speakers themselves.

On the present occasion Mrs. Piers's pretty little house looked its prettiest. It was freshly and suitably furnished, and sweet and bright with abundance of flowers from the Pierslynn conservatories. The dinner was irreproachable, as were also the waiters, who might have been family retainers so far as appearance went.

It was the first time Mrs. Piers had entertained Mr. and Mrs. Trent. Though she had wept over the degradation of putting her son in a solicitor's office, she could not deny that in taking him for a very reduced fee Mr. Trent had done her and hers a substantial benefit, and she felt a fair amount of gratitude. Moreover, they were successful people, and Mrs. Trent a very presentable person, who, though ready to accept and return civilities, knew how to hold her own, and never sought any one.

Nearly all the company were assembled when Mr., Mrs., and Miss Piers were announced, and as the room which looked due west was carefully darkened to exclude the too powerful rays of the setting sun, neither Laura nor Winnie could at first recognise the guests. Mrs. Trent soon came forward to greet them, and then stood talking and laughing with Reginald near one of the open windows, while Mr. Trent bestowed his efforts on Winifrid, throwing occasional crumbs of conversation to Laura.

'I do not think you know Mr. Vignolles,' said Mrs. Piers, leading a mild-looking man with a big forehead and an eye-glass to her daughter-in-law. 'I had the pleasure of meeting him at Interlachen last year, as I think I mentioned to you.'

Mr. Vignolles placed himself beside the sofa where young Mrs. Piers and her cousin were sitting, and at once opened on Swiss hotels and prices, the best methods of organising excursions, and the mistake people make in going to the nominally best hotels, where everything is dearer and nothing better than in the more second-rate establishments.

'It is nearly half-past seven,' said Mrs. Piers, coming across the room from where she had been talking to Colonel Bligh. 'I do not think we can wait any longer.

I expect a relative of ours who is anxious to renew his acquaintance with Reginald, an old diplomate, in very indifferent health, Sir Arthur Dalrymple, and——'

Before she could finish her sentence the more imposing of the two waiters threw the drawing-room door open and announced, 'Madame Moscynska.'

Laura felt that Winifrid started, but she could not see her face, for she turned quite away to ask Mr. Vignolles a question about pedestrian tours, which started him with renewed animation on a fresh branch of his favourite topic.

Meantime a little withered old gentleman, gray and bald, with a crush hat under his arm and a couple of decorations in his button-hole, glided in almost unnoticed in the wake of the Princess.

Round her every one seemed to gather as she stood for a few moments receiving their greetings with her usual quiet grace and low-toned speech. She was arrayed in clouds of black tulle, caught up here and there with gold cords and tassels, gold butterflies fastening the folds on her shoulders, a rich, peculiar-looking gold necklace, and deep red roses in her pale gold hair and in the left angle of her square low bodice.

Reginald approached last, and spoke to her apparently with pleasant, unembarrassed cordiality; then Laura heard him say, as if in answer to some question, 'Yes, she is here,' whereupon the group divided. Madame Moscynska walked straight to where Winifrid sat and, holding out her hand, said:

'Dear Mrs. Piers, I am so glad to see you, looking so well too. I was very unfortunate to miss you when I called, though I came early.'

Winifrid had risen from her seat, and, after an instant's hesitation, perceived perhaps only by Laura, she touched the hand presented to her, answering coldly:

'Thank you, I am quite well.'

Madame Moscynska next turned to Laura:

'I have the pleasure of speaking to Miss Piers. Though we met but once, you are not to be easily forgotten,' she said, this time substituting the slightest possible curtsey for the offer of her hand, and, accepting the chair presented by Mr. Trent, she sat down in front of the cousins and

proceeded to talk to Winnie with quiet, soft persistence, which, in spite of the former's monosyllabic answers, was calculated to give the impression that they were on the most friendly terms.

This was soon interrupted by the announcement of 'dinner,' when Mrs. Piers presented the decorated old gentleman to Winnie as 'my relative, Sir Arthur Dalrymple.' Reginald, acting as host, came forward to conduct Madame Moscynska, and Laura found herself told off to the connoisseur of Swiss hotels.

She felt strangely chilled and disturbed by the unmistakable dislike which Winnie evinced to her former 'guide, philosopher, and friend.' She had always felt an instinctive distrust of this fascinating personage, and was not sorry to see Winnie able to withstand her charm, whatever it might be; but that was no reason why she should be almost rude to her mother-in-law's guest. She (Laura) feared that Winnie would in some inexplicable way injure herself by what looked very like a display of unreasonable temper, though she had faith enough in her cousin to believe that there was some better reason than she knew for her evidently irrepressible aversion to the fair Anglo-Pole. These thoughts coursed each other through her brain while the soup was being served, and her cavalier gave her some curious information touching the *potage à la Cressy* at the Alpen König Hotel at Bâle. Then she looked round and saw Reginald at the foot of the table with Madame Moscynska on his right hand, Winnie between the ex-diplomate and Colonel Bligh, while she herself found Mrs. Trent on her right.

There was plenty of general talk, to which Reginald contributed his share, with not unfrequent asides to Madame Moscynska. Winnie was especially animated; her colour rose, and her laugh was frequently heard as she exchanged repartees and reminiscences with her respective neighbours.

Laura could do little beyond replying to the observations of the gentleman next her. She watched Winnie with nervous anxiety: there was no merriment in her laughter, and more defiance than enjoyment in the brilliancy of her eyes; she fancied, too, that Colonel Bligh looked at her curiously, if admiringly.

Arrived in the drawing-room, Mrs. Trent bestowed her attention on Winifrid, and Madame Moscynska appeared quite occupied by a confidential conversation with her hostess, while for some minutes Laura occupied herself with a book of photographs, that refuge of the destitute. She had scarcely finished examining it, however, when Mrs. Piers joined her, while Madame Moscynska calmly went across the room to Mrs. Trent and Winnie, who immediately lapsed into silence.

'Well, Laura,' said the lady of the house, who had fallen into a certain condescending familiarity with her during their residence together at Pierslynn, 'what have you been doing with yourself since you came to town; why do you never come to see me?'

'I have been very busy, Mrs. Piers; I have had some fresh commissions—for copies only, 'tis true—and I have a new pupil.'

'Really, you are getting on. We shall see you on the line in the Academy yet. And how is Admiral Desbarres? I wish we could have persuaded him to join us this evening; he is a most interesting man. He is quite ruined, lost everything, Mr. Trent tells me. Is he very much broken by his misfortunes?'

'Not at all. Indeed, were it not for his mania for giving, he would be very well off on his half-pay.'

'Perhaps so; but it is very unsatisfactory for *you*. Now, he will have nothing to leave, for of course his income dies with him. You ought to persuade him to save.'

'I, Mrs. Piers? I would not take so great a liberty. I hope to be able to provide for myself.'

'That is always difficult for a woman. It is fortunate for you that art is the fashion. Work such as yours is by no means unladylike according to modern ideas.'

'I should think not,' said Laura, smiling. 'Were I worthy the name of artist, I should indeed be proud.'

'That is all very well; but the life is precarious. Still, it is very fortunate you have the gift you possess.'

'Yes; it atones to me for the stigma I am told rests on my father's birth.'

Laura could not account for the impulse which urged her irresistibly to utter these words.

Mrs. Piers looked confused and uncomfortable.

'Who has been so ill-natured as to rake up that old story, Laura?' she asked. 'It does no good, and only pains you, though you really need not trouble yourself about it. No one can quarrel with you for what is not your fault.'

'Nevertheless, the sins of the fathers are almost always visited on the children,' said Laura sadly. 'And I dare-say my poor father experienced this.'

'I do not think so. He was very charming, and very popular with the family; a great favourite with old John Piers—the late man's father—and quite at home at Piers-lynn.'

'Is it possible?' said Laura, with a degree of sarcasm which quite escaped the notice of Mrs. Piers.

'Yes, I assure you. My poor husband was so much abroad that he knew less of him than the rest; but when he was in England we always had him at our house.'

Laura, with all her common-sense and cool judgment, felt moved to a kind of scornful indignation by the tone Mrs. Piers adopted as consolatory.

'What are you discussing so gravely?' asked Winnie, rising abruptly and coming to join them.

'Only my family history. Not a pleasant topic. Let us change it,' said Laura, as Winnie sat down on the ottoman beside her.

'Oh!' cried Winnie disdainfully, 'that is not of much matter. There is no shadow of doubt on the clearness and nearness of *our* relationship, dear Laura, or our friendship either.'

Before Laura could reply the door opened to admit the gentlemen.

Colonel Bligh and Reginald approached; the latter, taking his place on the opposite side of the ottoman from his wife, leaned over till his head nearly touched Laura's shoulder, and began to talk of Mrs. Crewe, of 'that son of hers' and the Admiral, but in an intermittent way, evidently with an effort; while every now and then he glanced at Madame Moscynska and his wife. The former was speaking with much suavity to Sir Arthur Dalrymple as they stood together in one of the windows; while Mrs.

Trent was listening with apparent interest to Mr. Vignolles, the words 'route,' 'twelve hours from Strasbourg to Bâle,' 'not more than five-and-sixpence a day, allowing for the exchange,' occasionally catching Laura's ear.

Presently Madame Moscynska, accompanied by Sir Arthur Dalrymple, walked slowly across the room, and, addressing herself to Mrs. Piers, the former asked :

'I think, dear Mrs. Piers, you might settle a question Sir Arthur and I have been arguing. You were a good deal at Stolzstadt, were you not? Tell me, was it the Princess Stephanie or the Princess Marguerite that went mad about one of the equerries, and always fancied everything was covered with dust?'

Mrs. Piers had an entirely different version of the old scandal to offer for consideration, and Reginald vacated his seat to make way for Madame Moscynska, who threw in queries and suggestions, sometimes addressed to Winnie, who never made any answer, though she ceased to converse with Colonel Bligh, and sat in silence with elaborate inattention. At length, at the first pause in the dialogue, she rose and went to speak to Mr. Trent, who was examining some water-colour drawings which adorned the walls.

Reginald looked after her first with a slight frown and then with a smile, an unpleasant mocking smile.

'Sing us one of your Polish songs,' said he to Madame Moscynska, with a certain familiarity which struck Laura. 'The one you used to treat us to when we lay off Fiume.'

She smiled, hesitated a moment, and then walked to the piano.

It was a wild, plaintive air, with a peculiar accompaniment, and she sang it admirably, dramatically.

'Isn't it expressive?' said Colonel Bligh to Winifrid. 'It is so utterly unlike drawing-room music. I remember she used to charm us with those queer ballads of hers when we were in the Adriatic.'

'Indeed!' said Winifrid.

'Winifrid, my dear, do play one of your German pieces,' said her mother-in-law.

'It is a long time since I played, but I will do my best,' Winnie answered, with something of her natural sweetness.

The excited colour had died out of her cheek, and

Laura thought her voice unsteady. She played, however, though not with quite her usual spirit, and was of course applauded.

'Do you play, Miss Piers?' asked Colonel Bligh.

While she was saying she did not, Madame Moscynska came up with a small piece of manuscript music in her hand.

'Brava, brava, *chérie*,' said she with an air of familiarity. 'I wish you would try this little "Pensée" for me. It is a *motif* by a young countryman of mine in whom I am much interested;' and she placed the leaves before Winnie.

'I am sorry,' replied the latter, 'I cannot attempt it; it is so closely written I fear I could not read it correctly.'

'Ah!' said Madame Moscynska, with a subtle smile and a little contemptuous shrug, 'the *caro sposo* and I know you do not always interpret notes aright.'

'Do you?' said Winnie, rising slowly and turning to face her. 'Are you sure I was wrong?'

'Come, dear Mrs. Piers, you are so bright and quick, I am sure you must have Southern blood in your veins; do play us another of your charming morceaux. Mr. Piers, persuade her to play to us.'

'Oh! people get tired of long pieces,' said Reginald, coming across the room at Madame Moscynska's summons. 'As we are all here, let us settle about Goodwood; we have no time to lose.'

'Pray do not include me in your party,' said Winnie, low but distinctly; 'I do not feel equal to the fatigue. If the carriage is here I will leave. You do not mind coming, Laura, do you?'

'But, Winnie, you were dying to go last week!'

'I prefer staying away now. Will you ask about the carriage, Reginald?'

'Yes, if you really feel too unwell to stay;' and muttering something about 'an infernal bore,' Reginald rang the bell.

'What is the matter, my dear?' said Mrs. Piers, hastening up.

'Only that London is a little too much for me, and I am not quite so strong as I thought,' said Winnie, smiling bravely. 'It is later than you think.'

'Indeed, you look very tired ; you will be the better for a good night's rest,' said Mrs. Trent kindly.

'Will you come with me, Reginald ?' said his wife, as, having taken leave of the company, and openly disregarded Madame Moseynska's offered hand, she paused beside him.

'Sorry I cannot ; I promised to look in at the club with Bligh. Laura will see to you ; I'll not be late.'

'Will you take a glass of wine before you go, Winifrid ?' said her mother-in-law, following her to the room where the cloaks were left.

'No, thank you,' said Winnie. 'I must say I am infinitely surprised that you should have asked that woman to meet *me* ! I may be foolish, wrong, suspicious, but I have a right to choose my own associates.'

'And I mine,' said the elder lady haughtily.

'Certainly, but not to force them on me.'

'I should be sorry to so——' checking herself and evidently trying to soothe. 'I had no idea your prejudices were so strong and *so* unjust, Winifrid ! You are wrong, and ill-advised to treat Princess Moseynska with such unmerited rudeness. For your own sake you should exercise more self-restraint. Do you think that I should invite any one to my house whose correct conduct I could for a moment doubt ?'

'I am sure you would not *if* you doubted ; but you do not,' cried Winnie, softening, and taking her mother-in-law's hand in both her own. 'Why do you not see that it is a battle for life I have to fight with this woman ?'

'I am afraid, my dear, that you are not yet quite free from your feverish wanderings,' said Mrs. Piers. 'Pray, Laura, try to bring her to reason.'

Winifrid, with a slight despairing gesture, turned abruptly away and walked to the carriage, and her mother-in-law, saying in a low tone, 'This is a pleasant outlook for my son,' went back to her guests.

Laura, stupefied with surprise and distress, followed her cousin.

'Tell them to drive to the hotel,' said Winnie. 'You will come with me, dear, will you not ? You can take the carriage on afterwards.'

'Winnie!' said Laura, 'what is the meaning of all this? I am afraid you are very unwise.'

'You do not know; you do not know!' exclaimed Winnie, with a cry of anguish. 'I cannot tell you all now; but I will. I thought never to have told you,' and she threw her arms round her cousin, who was shocked to feel how she trembled and sobbed.

'But you cannot doubt your own husband. You cannot fear a woman so much older, so much less beautiful than yourself! I think you must have let some morbid fancy get possession of you; these suspicions are too horrible.'

'They are,' returned Winnie more calmly. 'And if you too turn against me and re-echo the cry that I am foolish, morbid, mistaken, I shall not keep my senses. I have striven hard enough against my own convictions. I am not angry with Reginald. I do not so much doubt him as I fear *her*; for he is weak, and she is merciless, unfathomable, and my implacable enemy.'

'My own dear Winnie,' said Laura, 'you surely must exaggerate. Of course, till I hear your reasons I cannot judge whether you do or not. Yet it is impossible Madame Moscynska can be so deliberately wicked. You are excited; you are not yourself. To-morrow you may feel differently.'

'Heaven grant it!' said Winnie, with a low, shivering sigh; 'for to-night I despair.'

Leaning her head against Laura's shoulder, she kept silent for the few minutes that intervened until they stopped at the hotel. Then Winnie started up.

'I will come and have a long afternoon with you to-morrow, if you can give me the time. When may I come?'

'Not before four; I will make it a point to be at home then, and take care to be alone. And, Winnie, try, dear, to be more prudent; conceal your feelings. It will not do to irritate Reginald, or so dangerous a woman as you believe Madame Moscynska to be.'

'You do not understand,' replied Winifrid mournfully. 'I must defend my outposts, or all is lost. Good-night, dear Laura; good-night.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MRS. CREWE and Denzil were sitting in the dining-room with both windows open, for the latter was indulging in a cigar as he read, and his mother was busy arranging her letters, a very confused pile of ragged papers, making many comments for her son's information, to which he occasionally replied by inarticulate utterances that nevertheless quite contented her.

'You are early, my dear,' said Mrs. Crewe, as Laura entered. 'I did not expect you for an hour yet.'

'Winnie was tired, so we came away a little sooner than the rest,' said Laura, throwing aside her cloak and standing by the table in her long black silk dress, which, with her white lace fichu and ruffle, suited her unusually well.

Her gentle dignity of bearing struck Mrs. Crewe. She felt, as most did who knew Laura, that there was something in her to trust and lean upon, an inner light and force which, though not easy to define, would never fail or mislead. Thinking thus, Mrs. Crewe did not speak immediately, and, looking from mother to son, Laura said with a smile :

'How happy you seem, sitting comfortably together. Your mother is quite ten years younger since you settled down at home, Denzil.'

'Yes,' he returned, a soft gratified look stealing over his face, and a slight increase of colour, perhaps at Laura's unconscious use of his Christian name, perhaps because he knew that his mother's halcyon days would not last long.

'We are all the happier now you have joined us,' said Mrs. Crewe, holding out her hand to Laura. 'You are looking uncommonly well, my dear. You have quite a colour; hasn't she, Denzil?'

'Of course I have, if you notice it,' returned Laura, laughing and blushing vividly.

'Well, dear, and what had you for dinner?' began Mrs. Crewe, hastily tying up a parcel of selected letters, and tearing up the refuse with much energy.

Laura replied to the best of her ability, but acknowledged that many items escaped her memory.

'You should always try to notice and remember dishes,' said Mrs. Crewe gravely. 'The ideas they suggest will be of use to you when you have a house of your own, and give dinner-parties.'

Laura laughed. 'Could you fancy me giving dinner-parties? All that sort of society seems quite out of my reach: my world will never stretch beyond a studio and a few friends.'

'What did Mrs. Piers wear? I mean the Dowager,' resumed Mrs. Crewe, and a severe examination as to the toilettes of the company ensued. Then, after a slight break in the dialogue, Mrs. Crewe remarked: 'I suppose young Mr. Piers still seems very attentive and taken up with his wife?'

'Yes, of course! Why do you ask?' cried Laura, with a slight start; the question jarred strangely upon her. Could Mrs. Crewe divine that there was any reverse to the bright picture of their lives?

'Oh! I have no particular reason; only it strikes me that Reginald Piers will not be the most constant man in the world. He was very nice and pleasant, but I always thought him unsteady. I do hope she will know how to manage him.'

'Come, come, mother!' cried Denzil, smiling. 'You are an awful Cassandra sometimes.'

'I am nothing of the kind, Denzil; and even in joke, my dear boy, you should not call your mother names; these nautical allusions are quite beyond my comprehension.'

'I beg your pardon, mother,' quite gravely.

'Is it necessary to manage?' asked Laura. 'Surely with truth and tenderness one might keep a straight course.'

'And win the goal,' said Denzil, in a low tone.

'I am not so sure,' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe. 'You see, one can never know what a man thinks. It takes two to make truth of any use—one to speak and another to hear it; and most men are vexed when a woman *is* true and reasonable. It does not amuse them.'

'I protest, mother, you are ferociously severe. Why, I flattered myself you were fond of your son's sex.'

'So I am,' she returned eagerly. 'I always like to have

men about me—they can be very kind and useful ; but the best of them require management ; they like it, too—so much the better for us.'

' You must not let your son too much behind the scenes,' said Laura.

' Oh, Denzil is different from other men,' cried his mother. ' Do you know, he has been making such a delightful plan ; I hope you will agree to it. There is a cottage belonging to a friend of his to be let for two months, down somewhere on—on what coast, Denzil ?'

' Dorsetshire.'

' Yes, Dorsetshire. It seems that his friend wants to take his little girl away to London for medical advice, or some operation to be performed, so Denzil proposes that we exchange houses. You and I and the Admiral (if we can persuade him) will go down there the week after next, and Denzil will come down when he can, from Saturday till Monday. Think of the fresh air, and the sea-beach, and the wild flowers, the eggs and the milk, the cliffs, and cheap fish. When can you manage to start, my dear Laura ?'

' It would be very delicious,' exclaimed Laura immediately, seeing refreshing visions of blue waves and changing cloud shadows ; ' but I must arrange so much, and oh ! I cannot go while Winnie and Reginald are here.'

Her face changed as she spoke, and the dread of Winnie's promised disclosures came like a gray mist wreath wrapping her heart in a chilling vapour and chasing the colour from her cheek. Denzil looked sternly at her as she spoke, but she did not heed him.

' It is growing late,' he said abruptly ; ' we must not keep Miss Piers up. I shall wish you good-night. You can discuss the question of Barton's cottage to-morrow. He wants to come up here the first week in August.'

So saying, he rose, kissed his mother's brow in passing, and, wishing Laura good-night, left the room.

' Dear me ! how very sudden Denzil is sometimes,' said Mrs. Crewe. ' That is the misfortune of not having been in "the Service." Nice and good as he is, he cannot help a certain amount of the *je ne sais quoi* which men in the Mercantile Marine contract.'

' I am sure,' cried Laura heartily, ' there are Royal Navy

sailors not comparable to Denzil in mauner, or, indeed, in any way.'

' You are a dear, kind, discriminating girl. But just think what a chance this is of going out of town, my love, without a shilling of expense beyond the railway fares—and at this season we can get excursion tickets. Indeed, I expect to make a considerable saving, for of course milk, butter, eggs, vegetables, and butcher's meat will be considerably cheaper than here. I believe there is a vegetable and fruit garden, and a boat; we might fish for ourselves. Collins will remain here, and I wish them joy of her! She behaved shamefully to-day, and sent up the new potatoes perfectly raw.'

After careful consideration, Laura decided not to mention Winnie's intended visit to Mrs. Crewe, but trust to the chapter of accidents to secure them an uninterrupted tête-à-tête, and accident befriended her.

When Laura returned flushed and eager, almost fearing she was late, she found the coast clear, and had hardly divested herself of her outdoor attire when Winifrid arrived. She was looking very pale, and her eyes had a pained, fixed expression.

' How nice to find you all alone, dear Laura. Since I made up my mind to tell you everything, I have been thirsting to begin,' she cried, as she embraced her cousin.

' Mrs. Crewe is out for the whole afternoon. I think we may stay in the drawing-room.'

' Oh no, no!' said Winifrid feverishly, ' I can only tell all I have to tell in your own room, with the door locked. To think that I am but fifteen months a wife, and have such fears, such doubts! Is it not cruel?'

' Come, then, dear,' was Laura's only answer, and they ascended to her chamber.

' I must begin a long way back—a long, long way back,' said Winifrid, drawing off her gloves and removing her bonnet in an absent, hurried way.

' Tell me,' asked Laura, as she paused, ' was Reginald very, very angry?'

' No, I have scarcely seen him since. He was late, and this morning he was odd and cold, and a little contemptuous.'

He asked how I was, and when I tried to tell him that he did not know how I had been provoked, he laughed, and said, "I daresay Madame Moscynska could manage a dozen of you! When you are more a woman of the world, you will not make so much ado about nothing. However, you must smooth down my mother the best way you can," and then he went out. I am more distressed when he is like *that* than by his anger.'

'Now tell me everything,' said Laura.

'When we first went to Paris,' began Winnie abruptly, and then broke off to exclaim, with a quiver in her voice, 'Oh! what a happy, happy time it was! When I look back to those days I feel how great is the change that has come over our life. And we might still be so happy if only—yes—in those days I was selfish in my enjoyment, I scarcely ever thought of you; and if I did, I put it away, because it was so painful to remember that my gain was your loss. Well, when we arrived in Paris, Madame Moscynska called immediately. I had heard Reginald speak of her, and I was quite pleased to know any friend of his. I thought her charming. She used to put me in such good-humour with myself, and she used to discuss what dresses would suit me with Reginald, as if she were a loving elder sister. Then, in some way I cannot describe, a little cloud came between us. I grew frightened at the costly things she wanted me to choose, and would not be persuaded to have them, and sometimes Reginald sided with me. Then I used to feel a little left out when they talked for hours of their adventures in that yacht, though I was ashamed of myself, and tried to seem interested. Then we went away, and did the Italian lakes. Ah! how delightful that was, until poor Reggie was ill at Florence. He has never been quite—quite the same since. We came straight back to Paris, and found the Princess just arrived. She was very kind and helpful, and certainly managed to amuse Reginald wonderfully. She dined with us every day, and then she wanted still to buy everything for me, but I resisted. I was not cross—indeed I was not; I only said I must learn to act for myself.'

'Well?' asked Laura, as she paused; 'an indefinable estrangement had grown up between you?'

'Yes, yes; I am dwelling too long on this time. One evening we were sitting after dinner, and they were talking of their travels. The Princess had just said, "You remember that night we lay off Istria?" when I turned to find a needle, and caught a look from her to my husband, a look I cannot describe; it haunted me, but not for long. Reginald, who was very changeable, was so good, so tender, so taken up with me, that I put away my doubts, yet I never felt quite the same again to Madame Moscynska. Then we came to England. She happened to be coming too, and gradually I began to feel that she was like an evil spirit, bringing misfortune to me. I cannot describe how she pervaded everything, how she charmed every one. Mrs. Piers was fascinated by her. But for a long time Reginald did not mind her much. She used to spend two or three days with us now and then, but she was chiefly at her uncle's, Lord Dereham's, and we met at all the dinners and parties; and as certain as we met, she did or said something that made me look awkward or *bête*. It is impossible to tell you the effect she produced upon me. One day I dared to open my heart to Reggie, and told him how she affected me. He was not cross or unkind, but he laughed and kissed me, and exclaimed, "Jealous already, Winnie? If you take *that* view of our friend there is no use talking reason to you." Then I felt I was fighting the air, and all the time the air was poisoning me. I tried to think myself foolish, morbid. Oh, the pain, the struggle of that time! And Mrs. Piers openly sided with Madame Moscynska, and in a covert way rebuked me for my bad temper and jealousy. Then Reginald began to have a way of looking round as if he wanted somebody when he came into a room, even at home. But in April last we had gone to a great dinner at Dairysford, and I noticed that Reginald nearly cut the Princess. There was a Polish cousin of hers there, Graf somebody, a very handsome, wicked-looking man. He and the Princess were always talking together. After that Mrs. Piers had gone back to town, and Madame Moscynska was talking of going to Poland—she was always hinting at plots and politics; but Reginald was very kind, and stayed much with me.'

'One afternoon I had gone into his dressing-room to

put a new pair of braces I had worked for him on his table. It was very untidy, papers and things scattered about. His man had not been in to arrange it, so I began mechanically to put it right. I gathered up the letters, most of them on business, and went to put them into a little box or case that closed with a spring and stood on his table. The key was out, but evidently had not been turned, for when I touched the spring it flew open, and on the top lay an open note. It had no address, but I knew the writing, and I remember every word of it.'

'Can you repeat it?' asked Laura, deeply, painfully interested.

'Yes,' said Winifrid slowly, with a look as though reading something at a great distance. It was this: "You were wrong to doubt; circumstances have been very hard for me; nevertheless I will give you the assurance you demand,—more, I promise all you wish in future, provided—," then a long dash. "I have struggled with an untoward destiny all my life; must it overtake me now? I shall be in town on the 25th, when I can see you safely. You have cruelly misjudged me. If only you will hear me, all may be as it was before, when there was yet hope for us both. Let me see you as usual on Wednesday.—Ever yours, H." I knew the H was for Hedwig. When I read this everything seemed to stand out before me in clear blazing light. "Before" meant before he married me. *I* was the obstacle, and by some means *I* was to be effaced. What was life to me without Reginald and love? And *I* was so young.'

She covered up her face as if she could not bear the memory of that terrible moment.

'I did not feel angry with Reginald,' she resumed. 'I felt sorry for him. I think I lost my senses for a moment; then I remembered it was Wednesday. I shut up the box, put the note in my pocket, went back to my own sitting-room, rang the bell, and said I wished to see my husband when he came in. I did not know what I was going to do or to say. I was desperate, determined to know what I had to dread, what to renounce, before another day had gone over my head.'

She stopped for a moment; her breath came quickly;

she seemed parched and fevered. Laura rose to bring her a glass of water. Winnie drank it eagerly and recommenced :

'I do not know how I lived through the time till Reginald came back, and I could not tell if it were an hour or a lifetime before I saw him come into the room. I only know I ran to him, for, as I said, I did not feel angry with him, but wildly frightened, and burning to free him and myself from some evil spell. I could not believe he preferred any one on earth but me. I ran to him, and cried, "Oh, Reggie dear! what is this? What can it mean?" holding up the note before him. Oh, Laura! I shall never forget his face. He looked at me so that I shrank away. He grew red, and then hissed out, "Where did you find this?" snatching it from me.'

"In your despatch-box," I said. "I went to put away some letters that were lying about, and I found Madame Moscynska's note open."

"How dare you pry into my private papers? By heaven, she will think I have betrayed her!" and he began to pace up and down furiously, tearing the note into a dozen fragments. I was stunned. Not a word to soothe me; not a syllable of explanation; his only thought appeared to be of her. At last he exclaimed, "Have you talked to any one else of your insane suspicions?" Then my head seemed to give way, and I just remember holding out my arms to him and crying, "They are foolish and insane, are they not? No, no, I would not say a word of them to any one but you, and you will put them all away out of my head." He turned to me with a changed expression, and then I think he caught me as I was falling, and I can remember nothing more till I came to myself in mortal agony, and Reginald was beside me and the doctor, and I thought I was dying. It was not death, however, but a new life that came to me.'

Again she stopped, and a few tears relieved her.

'I was very, very ill; I scarcely cared to live; only as the days went by, and I saw Reginald constantly near me, so kind and anxious and tender, I began to hope and to revive, and then I recovered slowly. I could not put any questions to Reginald, but I used to look at him, I know,

with my soul in my eyes ; and one day, almost the first I was able to sit up, he said, "Now you are stronger, I want to explain all that stupid affair of Madame Moscynska's note." And I, with my hand in his, listened, glad to believe anything rather than break the delicious calm of that moment of repose. He said the truth was, Madame Moscynska had asked him for a loan of money some time before ; that he had hesitated to give it because he thought it was to help her cousin, who was a scamp. The Princess was deeply offended, and did not speak to him for several days ; then she looked so miserable that he sent her a little line to say he was willing to oblige her. The note I found was an answer to this, and as it was difficult to find an opportunity for private conversation at Dairysford, and my jealousy cut her off from Pierslynn, she was obliged to make a rendezvous in the grounds ; and then he tried to remember the words of the letter. He explained it all as bearing on this loan. The "hope for both of us," he said, meant for herself and her cousin, both of whom were much embarrassed. The "seeing him safely in London" was safe from the interference of Lord Dereham, as Madame Moscynska was always afraid of her uncle knowing the state of her affairs.'

'Was that not a very natural explanation ?' asked Laura thoughtfully.

'It seemed so to me,' said Winifrid. 'I was too glad to believe it then, only Reginald said nothing explanatory about seeing him as usual on Wednesday, and I would not be so exacting as to allude to it. But I was glad to be quiet and to believe. He was so dear and kind. Ah ! he loved me—he still loves me ! I have not lost him yet ! I began, in my returned happiness, to believe I had been unjust to the Princess. Reginald told me she was going away on a long visit to some relations in Poland, and that he wished me very much to receive her before she left. I consented ; I was so glad she was going.

'She came, more softly calm, more soothingly pliable, than ever. Yet, as before, I felt instinctively that she deliberately set herself to cross and neutralise me. After she had looked tenderly and thoughtfully at the baby, as if divining his future (I know she detested infants), and

talking of the interest every one took in me, she said, gently raising those strange eyes of hers to mine, "Before I go I must confess my sins to you, dear Mrs. Piers, and tell you how generous and kind your husband has been." So she went on to say that both her cousin and herself had got into difficulty in consequence of being mixed up in some political schemes; that at the present moment they were greatly embarrassed, and she had ventured to ask Reginald for help, which he had kindly accorded. I said I was glad he could be of use, and then added, "He has, I see, told you that your note on that subject fell into my hands, and probably that I misinterpreted it? I was foolish, perhaps, but you should not write so ambiguously."

'She looked surprised, and paused a little before she replied: "Have you not always misinterpreted me? I have felt it deeply. Nevertheless, I shall not offend again; I am on the point of returning to my own dear unhappy land for a long sojourn." Then my mother-in-law came in, and they talked till they tired me, and I had great difficulty in getting composed after she had gone, so much had her "confession" disturbed me.

'Though I blushed for my own suspiciousness, I was always wondering if they had arranged what she should say between them. I was not so well after this, and then I began to yearn for you. I had a sudden bitter conviction that nothing and no one was quite true and real but you. I think so still, dear, dear Laura!'

A sudden choking sob stopped her utterance for a moment.

'At any rate,' she resumed, 'Madame Moscynska went away and I began to forget her. Reginald was so good; and though I knew Mrs. Piers thought me jealous, she was kind enough, so I began to dream of happiness again—and yet the same complete love and trust I once had never quite came back. There were looks and tones of Reginald's that in some way always set me doubting.'

'I fear you tormented yourself ingeniously,' said Laura, with a sigh.

'I tried hard not,' returned Winnie; 'but I felt more exacting, less even-tempered than I used to be. Then you came. That did me a world of good; and Reginald

was more at ease with you. And it was so nice when Mrs. Piers went, even when Reginald went, until one morning—do you remember?—you mentioned accidentally that Madame Moscynska had not gone abroad. It gave me a great shock. However, Reginald came back so soon, and everything looked so fair, that I did not disturb myself much till I came up to town and found that dreadful woman here; found that she had laid her plans, that she had got every one on her side, and that she was resolved to force herself on me. Laura, I do not know what witchery there is about her; but I fear as much as I hate her, and I strive to deliver my husband from her, as much for *his* sake as my own. But, ah! he is slipping from me. The moment she appears there is a subtle change in him. Yet, Laura, I do not, will not despair. If only I had Reginald to myself all might yet be well; but, dearest, you must never let her win *you* over; never let her persuade you that she is a well-intentioned woman, not quite stiff enough for English ideas, and that I am jealous.'

'She shall never do that!' cried Laura warmly. 'I have always had an instinctive distrust of her; yet, dear Winnie, I do think you have tormented yourself unnecessarily. Things will mend.'

'Not if I am off my guard. She shall never display herself to the world as my intimate friend; and yet I almost tremble to think how she nearly defied me last night; that showed she felt pretty sure of her ground. And she is going down again to Dairysford, Laura, where I cannot escape her without a fracas! I mean to get Dr. Prior to order me to Carlsbad or somewhere, and once away, I shall feel safe; Reginald cannot refuse to come with me.'

'Yes, perhaps that would be well,' returned Laura, and fell into deep thought.

How should she add to Winnie's burden by disclosing the facts which had lately come to her knowledge? Yet might not the assertion of her claim rouse Reginald to a sense of duty? They surely might arrange between them so that he need not be impoverished, and yet that her rights should be acknowledged.

While she thought, Winnie rose and looked at her watch. ‘Dear Laura, I have been talking to you for more than an hour, and it has been a relief,’ she said. ‘I do not seem so hopeless as I was. What do you think, Laura?’

‘Oh, Winnie, it is impossible Reginald can care for any one but you. Be as resolute as you like against Madame Moscynska, but control yourself, and Reginald will respect you all the more. He is only amused with a clever companion. You see, as soon as she is out of sight he forgets her.’

‘He seems to do so; but I am growing to distrust him and everything; and as to self-control, that woman has the most diabolical power of stinging me with words no one else can understand. Now last night no one save ourselves, or perhaps Reginald, could understand why I grew so angry; but her audacity in reminding me of my not always interpreting notes aright was more than I could bear. Now I must run away. Come to me soon; the day after to-morrow.’

‘Yes, if I can. Good-bye. Be patient, dearest Winnie, patient and strong; these evil days will pass away.’

‘Adieu, my own wise Laura.’

A hearty kiss, and she was gone.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE long history which Winnie had recounted of her strange struggle with Madame Moscynska haunted Laura; she could not believe that poison so loathsome could arise from anything within the circle of lives pure and natural as Winnie’s and, she had hitherto believed, Reginald’s. Did Winnie exaggerate things? Was it possible that Reginald would vex his own dear wife rather than give up the second-rate pleasure of being adroitly flattered? Certainly she had good reason to doubt her cousin, her supplanter. Nevertheless, if she perceived that he was weak, illogical, unprincipled enough to rob her, she still believed that his heart was loving and considerate. Even

towards herself his intentions had not been so bad as his conduct finally proved.

It was marvellous even to herself how she shrank from exposing him.

Meantime the stream of events rolled on, not visibly affected by the heart-histories being enacted beneath or beside it.

Laura looked forward with a great sense of longing to the repose and entire change of scene which her visit to the coast promised. Winnie would soon be leaving town ; and even were Laura to be always near her, she could do little to help her. A wife must fight her own battles. No third person could interfere without doing more harm than good. Surely the present clouds would blow over, and Winnie's sky be bright as it ought to be.

She herself, despite her doubts and cares, felt a fresh interest in her life—a vague, quiet hope, such as she had not experienced for many months,—and, under this influence, was working at some nearly finished designs with energy one morning, intending to call on Winnie in the afternoon to tell her of their approaching departure, and learn her plans.

She had almost put the last touch to her drawing, and had paused, pencil in hand, seeing a vision of the beach with the rippling waves stealing up, when the door was suddenly opened, and Winnie flashed in upon her, radiant, smiling, lovely.

'Winnie, dear ! what has happened ?' cried Laura, starting up to meet her.

'All that is good and fortunate !' said Winifrid, embracing her. 'Last night Mrs. Piers dined with us ; she was wonderfully pleasant and amiable, and brought a letter from Helen. Sir Gilbert is recovering so slowly, the doctors insist on his going to one of the Austrian spas ; Franzensbad, I think. You may fancy my delight when Reginald exclaimed, "What do *you* say to trying the waters, or the air, Winnie ? It would set you up for the winter ; and we might take baby, too, if you liked." I hugged him on the spot. Think, dear, of his proposing the very thing I wanted ! I am sure I have done him

injustice. He wants to escape Pierslynn while that dreadful woman is at Dairysford as much as I do.'

'I am delighted to hear this!' exclaimed Laura. 'All will go well now.'

'Yes, I hope so; I believe so. I was so delighted, I felt as if I trod on air. We went to a dance at Lady Delmaine's. She and her husband are Saltshire people. It was charming, and I know I looked well. Colonel Bligh and a heap of men quite surrounded me. Oh! it was great fun, and I think Reginald was pleased. This morning Reggie and I have been busy making out the route and our plans. We are to start on Tuesday, and Mrs. Piers is going down to Pierslynn for a month or two with a cousin; so the place will not be quite deserted.'

'How glad I am to see you so happy!' said Laura, embracing her. 'Now you must banish all uncomfortable thoughts.'

'Oh, I will—I will indeed! And it will be nice to have dear Helen with us. Sir Gilbert is always horrid, but if he is weak and ill, he will be more manageable. Sybil is to go to her grandmother at Pierslynn. Now, dearest Laura, tell me, what are you going to do? I trust you will soon escape from London. Oh, dear, I want you to be happy; you know I do, Laura; and I think—I think you are looking like your own self—only better. Are you happy, Laura?'

'I am,' said Laura quietly but earnestly. 'I am at rest; I have plenty of congenial occupation and kindly companionship. Ought I not to be thankful and content? If I have still an anxiety, why, I trust to the great Guide to make it right. Do not trouble yourself about me.'

'You deserve all good,' said Winnie, tears rising to her eyes.

'To know that you are relieved from your fears will give zest to my holiday.'

After this interview, Laura did not see Winifrid alone save for a hurried moment when bidding her good-bye the evening she dined with her and Reginald. She was, as usual, ill at ease with the latter, in spite of all her efforts, and his careful attempts at unstudied cordiality. She was

always imagining how he must feel looking at her, hearing her voice, and knowing that he had sought her only to secure his plunder, and but for her overhearing his avowal to Winnie would have sacrificed them both unrelentingly.

Winnie was all bright anticipation, and with Colonel Bligh, the only other guest, kept up the conversation and animation of the *partie carrée* without pause or effort.

'I must say it is rather hard lines to be carried off to a German Bad a week before the twelfth,' said Colonel Bligh. 'Why, you missed the Pierslynn partridges last year!'

'Oh, I shall come in for the grouse and pheasants,' returned Reginald, 'and reap the reward of my conjugal devotion—eh, Winnie?'

'You ought indeed,' said Winnie, with a loving smile. 'But I do not think Reginald dislikes the idea of Austria.'

'I have long ago resigned myself to my fate,' remarked Reginald, with a slight laugh, 'and I try to get as much enjoyment out of life as my circumstances permit.'

'Hear him!' cried Colonel Bligh. 'His circumstances, indeed!—the luckiest dog in Great Britain!'

'When we come back,' said Winnie to Laura, 'I expect you to pay us a long visit at Pierslynn. We can give you a studio, and you can paint lots of pictures before the Academy opens. Can't she, Reginald?'

'Of course she can,' said Reginald wearily.

Laura wished them good-bye early, and went with the young mother to her sleeping baby.

'He is looking well, and greatly grown,' said Laura, looking earnestly at the boy.

'Yes, thank God! I sometimes wish there was nothing to take me from him; but I enjoy going out, and being seen too. Ah, Laura, if I am but safe from one fear, life will be only too delicious. Do you see how ready Reginald is to forego the shooting rather than return to Pierslynn?'

'When do you start to-morrow?'

'Oh, some time in the afternoon. We sleep at Dover, and take the Ostend and Brussels route.'

'Good-bye, dear Winnie. Write often.'

This last interview comforted Laura greatly. If Reginald's heart was true and steadfast to his wife, he might retrieve and atone for the past. She was glad he was gone away safely for some months; when they returned she would have a confidential explanation with him, and so arrange matters that her rights should be acknowledged and Reginald's reputation saved.

'After all,' she thought, with a slight natural sigh, 'it would be a divided kingdom only for a lifetime. I shall never marry, and after my death Reginald's son shall have his own again,' so for the present she put aside painful thoughts and doubts, and determined to enjoy the rest and change which her visit to the seaside promised.

The village of C——, although within five or six hours of London, had as yet escaped the overwhelming tide of autumnal cockneys. Denzil's friend, an ex-sea-captain, had married a C—— girl who inherited a small farm and cottage. This formed a delightful retreat to the tired mariner, who had added considerably to the quaint residence, and generally improved its surroundings, until it became the boast of the village.

The days previous to their departure were a trial, mental and physical, to Mrs. Crewe, and through her to Laura. But all difficulties finally arranged themselves. Toppy, it was decided, would be happier in her own home, with Collins, and Denzil promised to receive his friends.

'It is a downright mercy that the Admiral went away to his brother's. What we should have done with *him* in the house I can't think; not that *he* would grumble, dear good man; but the idea of having things topsy-turvy when he is with you seems in a way—sacrilegious.'

So said Mrs. Crewe when they had fairly started from Paddington, and waved their last adieux to Denzil, who stood looking after them on the platform.

The Dingle, as Mrs. Crewe's temporary abode was called, was a most tempting retreat. It stood a little way west of the village in the opening of a dell which ran inland from the sea, sheltered by high grounds at each side; some oaks and chestnuts gave shade and beauty to the little plot, half garden, half pleasure-ground, which intervened between the partly thatched cottage and a low

wall or embankment separating it from the stretch of sandy beach which spread from one dark reef and mass of shingles to the other. At high tide the water touched the embankment, and when it ebbed, left a wide margin of shining gold in the sunshine. The garden was sweet with roses, syringa, and heliotrope; great bushes of fuchsias and laurestinus testified to the mildness of the air, while on the western slope of the brae behind the house, where the fruit and vegetables caught the morning sun, lay a delightful kitchen garden.

The road from Northport, the nearest town, ceased at the gate, which was at the junction of the grounds with the beach, and as the travellers reached it, a neat rosy-cheeked servant-maid came running from the house to set wide the portal, and then collected the unavoidable small parcels from the omnibus conductor with evident hearty goodwill.

Mrs. Crewe was loud in her praise of the air and scenery.

'Really this charming place will make me ten years younger,' she said to Laura. 'I am quite impatient for Saturday, that Denzil may enjoy this invigorating air; I do not think he has been looking well lately. Have you observed it?'

'I cannot say I have,' said Laura.

'Perhaps not,' returned that lady severely. 'You have been so much occupied with Mr. and Mrs. Piers, that I am not surprised you overlook my poor boy, who, I must say, never forgets anything in which he can oblige you.'

'Indeed he does not,' said Laura, with a frank, sweet smile. 'You know quite well that I am nearly as impatient for his coming as you are.'

Time fled swiftly at the Dingle. Laura was early out with pencil or brush. On all sides she found material for pictures—the fishing-boats, with their load of gold and silver; the brown nets hung out to dry against the blue of sky and sea; the cows standing luxuriously knee-deep in the pool, into which the burn that flowed through the dingle widened in one place; the little sturdy urchins,

with happily a bright-blue frock or pair of vivid red stockings to lighten up their figures ; the great placid farm-horses, with shaggy fetlocks and flowing manes ; the patches of pine and oak-wood which lurked in sheltered hollows ; above all, the never-ending variety of the sea—the cliffs, graceful if not bold, the long sweep of glittering yellow sands. It was a continual feast of beauty.

Saturday, on which Denzil was expected, came quickly, and Mrs. Crewe was early afoot to make elaborate preparations for the expected guest's breakfast, dinner, and supper.

'Denzil is fond of fish ; let us get him some nice mackerel for tea ; and there are some good plums—he is sure to like plums.'

'Yes, Mrs. Crewe ; he is very fond of fruit and vegetables.'

'Sailors always are, my dear ; and no matter what splendid things they get in other climes, they always enjoy the humbler productions of their dear native land. How much are your eggs a dozen, my good woman ?—one and twopence ? Monstrous ! I could not think of giving such a price. Say tenpence, and I will take two dozen.' (*Aside*) 'Hens are not laying well just now, Laura, and we had better provide some.'

All things were in the highest state of preparation by six o'clock. But no Denzil made his appearance. Laura took a book and retreated to the garden ; Mrs. Crewe went to look at the poultry, and enjoyed a long gossip with Mercy, the little servant. This was a favourite amusement of Mrs. Crewe's, and the amount of information she thus acquired respecting the surrounding families was remarkable. At length Mercy was sent to bed, and after a careful inspection of the kitchen fire, Mrs. Crewe also took a book, and very soon fell asleep over it.

Laura stepped out upon the lawn, and strolled down to the beach wall. The tide was in, and lapping gently against the stones, and a young moon was silvering a long line across the bay, over part of which the shadow of the western cliffs lay softly. Laura stood long, listening to the murmur of the sea, drinking in the briny odour of the

waves, and lulled by the sweet influence of the hour into a half-unconscious condition of reverie. Suddenly a distant sound struck her ear. She listened. It was the sound of wheels and horses' feet, which drew rapidly nearer, and then stopped at the gate, which opened to admit Denzil.

'I am so glad you are come!' exclaimed Laura, advancing to meet him as he stepped out into the moonlight. 'We expected you about six or seven, and Mrs. Crewe was quite uneasy.'

'Laura!' he dropped the small valise he held on the grass, and took her outstretched hand in both his own. 'It is delightful to find you here with a kind welcome. How is my mother?'

'Oh, so well. She was tired waiting for you, and has fallen asleep. She will be delighted to see you,' said Laura, turning towards the house.

'Wait a moment,' returned Denzil. 'It is such a heavenly night, let us go round by the beach wall. This is glorious. Doesn't it seem to lift one clean out of the common cares of life?'

'It does indeed; as if there was a soul in inanimate nature that was casting some spell upon you.'

'And you are pleased with the place? You are happy here?' said Denzil, turning to look at her.

'Perfectly pleased; quite happy,' she returned. 'Very thankful, I assure you, for the opportunity of renewing my acquaintance with nature.'

'I wish you were never to have anything else,' said Denzil kindly. 'Yes, this is a delightful resting-place. It has always been a dream of mine to have a leafy nook to retire to when I have done enough to entitle me to rest.'

'You are too young to think of such a thing for years to come.'

'No doubt; but it will take all those years to make fulfilment possible.'

'And if so for you, how much more for me! Only I want so much less. But let us go to your mother.'

Of course there was a rapturous greeting from Mrs. Crewe, and then a pleasant, cheerful gathering round the

supper-table, and some light-hearted talk before the party separated for the night.

Denzil delighted his mother by telling her that he was going to stay till Tuesday, and intended to see if he could not give them a sail on Monday.

'By the way, I have a letter for you from the Admiral. It seems he has mislaid your address, and so wrote to my care.'

'I wonder at that; he is always so methodical,' said Mrs. Crewe, opening it. 'Oh, he says he will be with us on Thursday. His brother's house is full of company, and it is too much for him; he wishes for the well-ordered quiet of my house. What a dear, discriminating saint of a man he is! He shall have everything he likes here.'

CHAPTER XL.

THE boating expedition was charming, perhaps not the less so because Mrs. Crewe declared her dread of the water would not permit her to enjoy it, and she therefore remained at home. Some rambles on the shore and along the cliffs, with a drive to a ruined castle at some miles' distance, made Denzil's visit pass but too quickly. It was very lonely after his departure.

'It is not that he is a great talker,' said his mother, as she and Laura sat together under the oak-tree in the evening, 'but he listens so well, and knows so much; he is so kind and well-tempered and considerate for a man! Ah! the woman he marries will be lucky.'

'Yes; he is very, very kind and pleasant and well-informed,' said Laura heartily; but added, with a spice of mischief, 'I have heard Mrs. Trent say that marriage is an extraordinary touchstone; that men who have been dutiful sons, kind brothers, pleasant friends, sometimes turn out disagreeable, tyrannical husbands.'

'Then it must be their wives' fault. I am sure Mrs. Trent need not talk—she does as she likes with her stiff six-and-eightpence of a husband! I do not think much of *that* Mrs. Trent. It is rather extraordinary, considering

the terms you and I are on, that she never asked me to her house!—as if the widow of an officer in the Royal Navy was not more than the equal of the best professional man in London !'

The Admiral arrived on the appointed day.

Both Mrs. Crewe and Laura were struck by the haggard, worn look of his kind handsome face. But he soon recovered, and seemed to enjoy his quiet room, the simple beauty of his surroundings, the soft fresh air.

The Admiral was fond of an early walk with Laura to the beach or the pier, to see the fishing-boats come in, or to watch the children hunting for periwinkles, while he talked gently and kindly to the fishermen, who soon recognised him as at least '*a noble captain.*' One afternoon, on her return from an unusually long ramble with her guardian, Laura found a letter awaiting her from Winifrid, dated from Dresden. They had at the last moment altered their route, as she had persuaded Reginald to let her revisit the scene of so much pleasure and sorrow, and look at her father's grave. They were going on next day to visit Prague, and thence to Franzensbad, where she begged Laura to address her reply. Finally, the words, 'Be at rest about me; I think all is well, and I am happy,' filled the cup of Laura's content to the brim.

Denzil was not able to revisit the Dingle till the middle of the following week.

His friend Captain Ritson was, he said, in great spirits; the operation on his little girl's eyes had been happily accomplished, and they hoped in another month to be able to bring her back to her seaside home. They were quite satisfied with Collins.

'Then they are easily pleased,' said Mrs. Crewe. 'Does the house look clean? and have you any idea if she makes the dustmen call regularly?'

Denzil answered the first query in the affirmative, but acknowledged his ignorance as to the other.

'And my precious Toppy? I trust that dear cat is not neglected?'

'Far from it; she is an immense favourite.'

After the evening meal the little party strolled out upon the lawn to watch the receding tide and the last gleams of a fine sunset. The Admiral fell into conversation with Mrs. Crewe on the subject of moon-blindness, which he had often seen among sailors—*à propos* of the operation which Denzil had mentioned.

The latter was walking apart, smoking his cigar, when Laura came from the house with a shawl she had sought for Mrs. Crewe. After wrapping it round her she turned away, and said, with the familiarity that had grown greatly between them of late :

'Denzil'—he threw away his cigar and joined her at once—'I have ventured on a very audacious project since you were here.'

'And what may that be ?'

'There is a lovely little nook round that spur of rock behind the Dingle, with a glimpse of blue sea to the right, and a tangled mass of brambles and wild leaves over the lower rocks, with just two larch-trees, behind which at sunset the light comes in the most marvellous way. It has taken hold of my imagination. I feel as if I must and could paint it ; and I think, if I can at all work it up to my idea, I shall try to get it into the Royal Academy.'

'Try, by all means ; even if you do not succeed, it will be an incentive to work.'

'Yes, but I want very much to succeed. You must come and see the place and my sketch, and help me with your advice.'

'The best I can give is at your service ; but I am afraid it will not be worth much.'

'Oh, it is worth something. It would be such a grand thing for me to have a picture exhibited ; fancy what importance it would give me in the eyes of that little Jew man who ordered the copy I am to finish when I go back ! I do not think he would venture to call me "my dear" any more.'

'The deuce he does !', cried Denzil. 'The insolent beggar !'

'Oh, he does not mean to be insolent,' said Laura. 'It is a sort of official manner ; the more he "dears" you, the more he beats you down.'

'I don't like the notion of your selling things to these fellows. It is a shame you should be obliged to go to them.'

'It is not like you to talk in that way ; if you are to live by work, you cannot pick and choose your patrons and purchasers. You would be edified to hear how I stand up for myself, and haggle until I get an advance of ten shillings.'

Denzil laughed.

'I cannot fancy you haggling ; that is more in my mother's line. She is the most generous soul in the world, and yet she dearly loves a bargain.'

'Oh, I am growing quite hardened. I remember when it was agony to me to name a price, not so very long ago. But I am much stronger in every way than I was.'

'I think you are—much stronger and better in every way,' he returned, looking straight at her with kindly thoughtful eyes, as if he rejoiced in the new life that was visible in her whole face and expression, in her colour and carriage.

'We must have a consultation over the picture tomorrow,' he said ; 'and when that is over, I—I want some advice from you, or rather your help in making a decision.'

'I am afraid I cannot be much help to you.'

'Yes, you can,' returned Denzil decidedly ; and there was a long pause, during which they both gazed at the rippled stream of light stretching out across the bay, and listened to the soft murmur of the receding tide.

'Do you know anything of Mr. Piers's whereabouts at present ?' said Denzil.

'I think they must be at Prague just now ; but I am not sure. I am to write to Franzensbad, on or after the fifteenth.'

'Do they make a long stay ?'

'Winnie mentions no plans.'

At dinner next day Mrs. Crewe announced that it was her intention to visit a deserving and bedridden old woman (under the Admiral's guidance), and take her some tea and

sugar, as the want of those necessaries and inability to read the Bible were her two principal deprivations.

'I shall spend the afternoon sketching in the cove. Perhaps you will look in there and see how I am getting on,' said Laura.

'With pleasure, my love. Denzil, what are your plans?'

'I shall be resolutely idle, and enjoy myself.'

'But you are going to advise me,' cried Laura.

'I do not forget; it will not be fatiguing.'

As soon as the sun had got round a little to the west, Laura gathered her materials together and started for her favourite spot. Denzil, who was lounging under a tree on the lawn, came forward directly she issued from the open door and relieved her of part of her load, walking beside her rather silently while she talked freely, till they reached the spot from which Laura had taken her sketch.

Then there was the business of opening the colour-box and arranging the folding easel, the fixing of the artist so as to catch the exact points which she had sketched in previously.

'You see,' said Laura, 'if I can only get enough of the blue misty distance there to the left out to sea, then the brambles and heather and mossy rocks, and those two lovely larch-trees with the light behind their upper branches, would make a pretty picture. If I could put the pensive tenderness and repose they express on canvas, I would indeed be happy! But that requires genius, and I fear I have not enough for such a consummation.'

'I do not know,' returned Denzil thoughtfully. 'I am not sure that I have the power to recognise it, if you had. Still, you have got in these stones and the tint of the heather very well. Your distance might be more distant. Don't you think these rocks, with a fringe of foam round them, brought in in the middle distance, would make the background farther off?'

A long discussion ensued, and then Laura set to work diligently, while Denzil lay down on the soft, short mossy grass at a little distance, and watched her in silence.

'Don't you think you might rest now?' he said at length.

'But I am not tired.'

'Have you forgotten that you are to give me—well, to help me to decide a matter of importance, at least to myself? I waited patiently till you were free to hear me.'

'Oh yes; I am quite ready,' laying her palette carefully aside. 'I think I have done pretty well to-day. In another half-hour the sky behind the trees will be much richer. Well?' looking up at Denzil, who had sat down on the piece of rock beside her, and, leaning his elbow on his knee, rested his cheek on his hand.

He did not speak for a moment, and then said rather slowly :

'You perhaps remember my telling you some weeks ago that I might possibly go to Japan? The mail is nearly due on the arrival of which I shall probably have to decide.'

'Yes, I remember,' returned Laura, feeling suddenly chilled at being confronted with this possibility. 'I am sure, both for your mother and myself, I hope you will not go.'

Denzil plucked a handful of heather, pulled it to pieces hastily, and flung it from him; then turned to Laura, and, looking straight and steadily at her, said :

'That depends upon you.'

'On me!' said Laura. 'How so?'

'Are you, then, still so much engrossed by another that you cannot understand why my future is at your disposal?' cried Denzil impatiently. 'How is it you do not understand, you do not feel, that I love you, even though you may be indifferent to me? Tell me, how shall I decide respecting the appointment I expect? Will you be my wife—and give me an object to work for, even if I leave you for a while to make my position more worthy of you? —or will you take the hope from me?—for, perhaps against probability, I *have* hoped.'

Laura sat silent, bewildered, looking back with the swift glance of memory at many an incident which she now felt ought to have shown her that Denzil was more than a friend, yet half incredulous.

'I do not seem able to believe it,' she said slowly. 'We have been so happy together, you have done me so

much good, is it not a pity to change such a friendship for —for another feeling?’

‘But,’ returned Denzil, his strong kindly face lighting up with an expression she had never seen in Reginald’s, ‘suppose feeling gives you no choice? I did not *choose* to fall in love with you; but, living with you, knowing you in bitter trial, in the strength and tenderness of your everyday life, who could help loving you as I do, with my whole heart?’ He took her hand as he spoke, and bent his head till his brow rested upon it, a gesture so loving and reverent that Laura could scarce keep back her tears; while his words seemed to rend away some cloud or curtain that had hidden the depths of her own soul.

‘But, Denzil,’ gently drawing away her hand, ‘are you quite sure of yourself, quite certain that your friendly interest, the absence of other women—you go so little into society—have not misled you? I am half afraid.’

He smiled.

‘I am very certain of myself; it is of *you* I want to make sure. Can you love me? Will you be my wife? I know I have little to offer of this world’s goods now, but you are not the woman to shrink from beginning humbly with the man you love—if you will love me, Laura?’

‘I am afraid to believe—afraid to trust.. Ah, Denzil, I have suffered so much, that I fear to come out of the soft gray shadows of my life even into sunshine.’

‘Dearest,’ said Denzil, drawing nearer to her, ‘there is very little brilliancy in the existence I want you to share; there is very little change in our relationship either, only we shall draw closer to one another, and I shall know that you are all my own. I am not often presumptuous, Laura, but I think—I believe—I could make you happy in the quiet home-like way that suits you.’

‘Are you indeed so earnest?’ said Laura, impressed by the seriousness of his tone. ‘Is it possible that you imagine me really necessary to you?’

‘You are! I do not say that if you reject me I should never strive or hope or recover myself again—I trust there is stuff enough in me to bear up even under so heavy a blow—but——’—a short expressive pause—‘my life would be better and happier with you than it ever can be without

you. When I first met you I liked you ; but, as I daresay you saw, I was tremendously taken with Winnie ; however, I soon saw that Piers was as far—ay, further—gone than myself about her ; I saw there were rocks ahead for all of us, and yet it was out of my power to prevent the mischief. The day Winifrid spoke to me about her wish to go to Germany I was sure of what I suspected before—that she recognised your cousin's feeling for her, and feared for herself. Then, when the mysterious quarrel rose between you and your *fiancé*, I guessed you had come to a knowledge of the truth, and I understood the fortitude, the faithfulness of a nature that could keep so brave a front as you did. Then I went away ; I was glad to go, glad not to be vexed with the presence of a girl I could have loved well had she cared for me ; but in my lonely hours at sea I thought oftenest of *you*. When I came back I was delighted to find you with my mother. You made her house a real home to me ; you were the most interesting companion I had ever had. I felt soon that nothing the world could give me would be complete without you—and—speak to me, Laura ! I have horrible pangs of jealousy when I think that Reginald Piers is still perhaps a rival. It makes me savage to think you ever cared for him. If that is all past and gone, might I not be your faithful companion for the rest of our journey ?'

'I am greatly startled,' she said slowly ; 'I never dreamed that you cared for me in *this* way. I confess I do not like to think of your going away ; my life will be very dull without you—and if indeed I can make you happy, if you are sure you will be satisfied with so poor and insignificant a partner as myself——'

She stopped abruptly, her cheek growing pale, her heart beating painfully, overcome with the mixture of pain, pleasure, remembrance, fear—astonishment that she was on the point of accepting Denzil Crewe.

But he again caught her hand and tenderly kissed it.

'Do not hesitate,' he said ; 'you see how dear you are to me. If hearty love and warmest sympathy can make a woman happy you will have both. I have spoken abruptly, but you could not understand that I loved you till I told you so. Now let me feel that I have a sure anchor—that

I may go away with the hope of finding you when I come home ready to share all I can gather together for you.'

Laura did not speak for a moment, but she left her hand in his, and he watched her with earnest, eager eyes.

'I think,' she said at length, with a sweet hesitation, 'that, after all, we ought to make each other happy, for if sympathy and understanding cannot make us mutually helpful I know not what can.'

'You will then promise to be my wife, when I return to England—that is, within a year from this day?' said Denzil, still holding her hand and looking at her with all his soul in his eyes.

Laura thought yet for a moment; then, raising her eyes to his with a frankness too serious to be shy, said, softly but distinctly:

'I will.'

Denzil again kissed the hand he held, and pressed it to his heart. 'Laura,' he exclaimed, and there was a tone of deep controlled emotion in his voice that thrilled her strangely, 'you give me new life, new energy!'

Neither spoke for a few minutes; both hearts were full; the light of a new, a solemn happiness hushed them, as the stillness of earliest dawn is most profound just before the first songs of greeting burst forth from wood and field.

'I cannot paint any more to-day,' she said, and began to collect her painting materials together with trembling hands.

'No; but you can stay a while longer,' said Denzil, coming to help her; 'I have so much to say. I may find the expected letters which will oblige me to start for Yokohama within a fortnight on my return.'

And he proceeded to speak fully of his own prospects; of his hope of an honourable and profitable career; of his regret at the necessity of leaving his now affianced wife for such a length of time. Laura felt almost dizzy with the sudden change that a few words had wrought in her life; almost unable to believe that she was calmly discussing a future to be passed with Denzil, who a few hours ago was but a new friend. How wonderfully at home with him she felt! how quietly happy! How every word of his displayed an honest, resolute, kindly nature!

'And how pleased my mother will be!' were the concluding words of one sentence.

'Do you really think so?' said Laura. 'I know she is fond of me; but she scarcely thinks any one good enough to be your wife.'

'If she be not pleased she is not the woman I take her for.'

'But a mother might be excused if she objected to my want of all worldly recommendations.'

'My mother knows too well what you can and will be to her son, not to welcome you with open arms. *How wide* she will open them!' added Denzil, a happy laugh flashing over his brown face. 'Must we go, Laura? It cannot be six o'clock yet!—yes, it is. Come then, before we leave this gate of heaven give me one kiss, the seal of our betrothal!'

CHAPTER XLI.

THE next day was still young when Denzil broke the news of his engagement to his mother. Laura had gone to look for a book the Admiral wanted, and on her return to the sitting-room Denzil advanced, and taking her hand, exclaimed:

'Mother, Laura and I have a secret to tell you.'

'I do not think you have,' she returned, shutting her account-book with a snap, and coming up to Laura. 'I am far too experienced a woman of the world not to see how matters were tending. My love'—folding her in a huge embrace—'I receive you as a dear daughter, for I am sure you will make my precious boy happy. I rejoice on your account too, dear Laura; for I *will* say you are a lucky girl to have won such a heart as my Denzil's.'

'Mother!' he exclaimed, in a tone of remonstrance.

'Do not interrupt, Denzil—I say no more than I have a right to; you might, I am sure, have chosen whom you liked; but I think you have chosen wisely. God bless you, my dear children!'

And bending down her head on Laura's shoulder, Mrs.

Crewe shed a few tears ; finally, she embraced her son, and sat down declaring that now she felt her task in life was done.

'How will the Admiral take it ?' were her next words, with a slight accent of doubt.

'He has already taken it well and kindly,' said Denzil. 'I thought it right to ask his consent before speaking to Laura ; I feared he might not think me a good enough match for his ward, but I am happy to say he accepted me most kindly, provided I found favour in Laura's eyes ; and even did me the honour to express his satisfaction in committing her to my care.'

'So he well might,' said Mrs. Crewe emphatically.

All this time Laura had contented herself with returning her intended mother-in-law's embrace warmly ; she now whispered :

'Dear Mrs. Crewe, I will try to be a good daughter to you.'

'I am quite sure you will, my dear. And now I shall go. As it is market-day, I will take Mercy with me into the village, and get something nice for dinner in honour of this joyful occasion. I believe there are pheasants to be had sometimes at the general shop—poached, no doubt, but we need know nothing of that ; and perhaps a brill, if the boats are in.'

'But, my dear mother, I have something more to tell you,' interrupted Denzil, 'which may not please you so much, though it is good news too ;' and he proceeded to inform her of the proposal of his firm to despatch him to Japan.

At first Mrs. Crewe was irreconcilable, and even shed a few tears ; but she gradually came round to her son's representations, that a year or so would be the extreme limit of their separation, and then he would really settle down for the rest of his life.

'So you said before, Denzil,' she exclaimed, 'and now you are off again to the other side of the world. What does Laura say to your scheme ?'

'That Denzil knows best,' she said. 'Yet I wish he had not to go.'

'When do you expect to know the time you must leave ?'

'My week's holiday will end on Monday ; I expect to find the letters which will decide everything on Tuesday at the office. I must have a week to prepare, and hope to start in about a fortnight.'

'So soon ?' cried his mother, while Laura silently pressed the hand that held hers, and the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of the Admiral, who gave his cordial assent to the proceedings.

The few days that intervened before Denzil left them made themselves wings, and fled away with surprising speed. They were followed all too quickly by a sudden hasty parting, which seemed to cost the mother more grief and tears than the *fiancée*, who was deeply touched by the strong feeling betrayed by Denzil in bidding her farewell.

Laura sought solace in earnest work. Mrs. Crewe was too used to these separations not to bear this one with resignation, while the bright future beyond supplied her with an endless source of conjecture and anticipatory arrangement. She settled where Denzil was to live, the amount of rent he ought to pay, the servants they were to keep, and the parties they were to give. So the hours slipped by, and Time, the healer, brought beauty and hope into their lives.

Just before she was to leave the Dingle for Leamington Road, Laura had a long letter from Winifrid. It was written in high spirits. All was well with her and hers. Lady Jervois and Sir Gilbert were with them. The walks and drives were lovely, the company most amusing, and, above all, Reginald was about to be rewarded for his goodness in giving up the partridges at Pierslynn, for a Graf, with many consonants in his name, had invited him to his place near Kalisz, in Prussian Poland, where there were forests and game of every kind. On his return they would bend their steps homeward, travelling by easy stages, and probably would reach London towards the end of October.

Laura soon found plenty of work, and watched with pride and pleasure the growth of a certain little hoard kept with jealous care. Success seemed to come at her call ; so she waited patiently, though not without a certain dread, for the return of Reginald and his wife to London.

The Admiral, for some unexplained reason, was less occupied with the Christian Brethren and Mount Moriah than formerly. Mrs. Crewe accounted for this by supposing that the dear Admiral's natural good sense and knowledge of the higher class of society had at length surmounted his acquired fanaticism. Laura expressed no opinion, but suspected that her guardian was in some mysterious way short of funds.

Herbert Fielden was a frequent visitor during the months he was in London, and Laura was surprised and pleased to find him companionable.

They sometimes took a walk together on a fine Sunday, when he used to talk very confidentially. He had not forgotten his strong liking for Denzil, and their conversation often turned upon him. Herbert also in his confidential talk frequently let fall scraps of information touching Madame Moscynska which surprised and disturbed his hearer. The fair Pole was a great favourite with the unsophisticated boy.

'Doesn't she ride and play cards! I can tell you she is more than a match for any of the men at Pierslynn. She was awfully kind to me, and taught me no end of games. She is a tremendous politician, too—always plotting against Russia. Mrs. Piers is very fond of her; she was in great hopes of converting her to Protestantism this summer, only she was obliged to go abroad so suddenly.'

'Has she gone abroad?' cried Laura. 'Where?'

'I don't know. There was some plot on foot in Germany, I think, so she went to help it. She is an extraordinary woman.'

This conversation took place at the end of October, and about a fortnight after Herbert came in to tell his friends at Leamington Road that he had received an urgent summons from his brother, who had found a berth for him in the house of a friend, and to consult with the Admiral as to the preparations requisite for his start.

'I feel most severely that I trusted too much to my own strength, and rejected competent advice, when I embarked in that unfortunate Hungarian undertaking,'

said the Admiral. ‘Having assumed the place of guardian to you and your young cousins in a parental sense, I should have been more cautious; still, to live in a constant state of doubt and suspicion is to neutralise all power of doing good.’

He sighed deeply and gazed away towards the window with the painful perplexed look that always touched Laura.

‘Dearest guardian, if you would only think more of yourself, your own wants and rights, you would be better and happier; the only living thing you are hard to is yourself. As for us, we are all well provided for now; it will now be our duty and happiness to take care of you.’

‘Ay, how differently matters are arranged for us compared with our own designs. But I feel at rest as concerns you, dear Laura, and believe your lot, if humble, will be a happy one. Winnie’s is a more brilliant and a more trying position. I trust she knows where to find strength. Have you heard from her lately?’

‘Not for more than a month. I expect her next letter will say when we may expect to see her.’

From Winnie’s next epistle, dated from Vienna, Laura gathered that a previous letter must have gone astray. After some account of the baby, whom she did not think quite so well as he had been at Franzensbad, she went on:

‘I am weary waiting for a letter from you. If you cease to care for me, what is left! And you may judge from my last how happy I have been since poor Helen left. Sir Gilbert is really wonderfully better. Is it not strange how disagreeable, unnecessary people are spared, and sympathetic, kind ones, like the dear father, are swept away? To think that it is little more than two years and a half since we were left desolate at Dresden! I seem to have lived through two lives! I find my German useful; some of the “Grandes Dames” whose husbands Reginald met in his hunting expeditions at Kalisz, have called. They are amiable and civil, and delighted that I can speak with them in their own tongue. But I do not interest myself much in anything. I long to be back in England, and shall not soon leave it again. I have no idea when we shall start on our homeward way. Reginald is well

amused, and has many Austrian friends. Imagine how surprised and pleased we were to meet Colonel Bligh, the other day, in the Prater. He seemed like an old friend, and is really quite a comfort to me. Write to me at once, dearest Laura, that I may have your letter before I leave.'

CHAPTER XLII.

HERBERT had gone. The dull and shortening days of November were gliding fast away. Winnie did not write, and the only news Laura received of her was from the Dowager Mrs. Piers, who came up to town for a few days' shopping, and called upon Laura. She said that her son and his wife had left Vienna and intended to return by Munich and Nuremberg to Paris, where they would probably make a short stay ; that Winnie was a very bad correspondent ; and that she (Mrs. Piers) feared her daughter-in-law was subject to nervous attacks, similar to what had almost cost her her life last spring.

Laura's uneasiness took larger proportions after this conversation. All her forebodings centred round the graceful image of Madame Moscynska. Where had she gone when she cut short her visit to Dairysford, and left her uncle's house without a mistress ? What was the source of that mysterious allusion in Winnie's last letter, ' You may judge how happy I have been ' ? Every morning she came down hoping to find a foreign letter awaiting her on the breakfast-table, and every morning she was disappointed.

One afternoon in the last week of November, Laura had reached home after a long morning's work. It was dull and cold, and snow had begun to fall before she reached home. With a pleasant sense of labour accomplished and rest earned, Laura changed her dress, intending to allow herself an hour's reading of an article on Art in the *Fortnightly*, as soon as Mrs. Crewe would allow the lamp to be lit, until which time she had her knitting.

The dining-room was unoccupied when she entered, save by Toppy, who was sleeping in a favourite arm-chair ;

a good fire glowed and gleamed in the grate, contrasting pleasantly with the gloom and slow-falling snowflakes outside.

'I wonder where Mrs. Crewe is,' thought Laura, as she drew a low easy-chair near the fire, and looked round for her work-basket.

As she put out her hand to take her work she noticed that a small card lay beside it, and on it was printed the words, 'Colonel Courteney Bligh, Junior United Service Club.' Laura stood still for a moment or two gazing at this morsel of pasteboard, lost in conjecture. What could have induced him to call upon her? Nothing short of a direct commission from Winnie could have sent him to Leamington Road. How vexed she was to have missed him! She was inclined to write him a note, asking if he had any special commission from Winnie. While she mused, Mrs. Crewe came in in one of her best caps, and a lace fichu, her gold *châtelaine*, too, at her side, certain indications that some one or something unusual was expected.

'Oh! you have found the card, have you?' she exclaimed as she entered. 'Who is he, my dear? I never heard of *him* before.'

'A friend of Reginald and Winnie's. I have met him with them. I suppose he has some message for me.'

'Collins says he is a "grand gentleman," and came up in a hansom. I had gone round to the butcher. I must really leave those people, Laura—the leg of mutton this morning was quite two ounces short weight. I just begged them to remember that I have scales in my kitchen—and don't you ever be without them, my dear, when you have one. It must have been about one o'clock. He was dreadfully disappointed not to find you, and asked when you would be in, and when Collins said at three she thought, he said he would call about that time.'

Laura was startled and full of a fearful looking-for of evil, and while she pondered, and Mrs. Crewe swept to and fro, putting the chimney ornaments straight, brushing up the fireplace, etc., a loud ring set Laura's heart beating, and the next moment Colonel Bligh entered.

'I am very sorry I was not at home when you called this morning,' said Laura.

'I have stayed in town to-day expressly to see you,' replied Colonel Bligh, in a wonderfully soft voice for so big a man.

'Indeed! Let me introduce you to Mrs. Crewe.'

Another bow, and then Colonel Bligh took the seat indicated to him, and, glancing quickly at Mrs. Crewe, said in his usual quiet tone:

'I saw our friends in Paris yesterday, and I promised Mrs. Piers to see you.'

'Ah! how is she?' cried Laura, her eyes lighting up. 'She has not written for such a long time.'

'Why, that is her complaint against *you*! I told her I thought there was a mistake somewhere.'

'She has not written to me since they left Vienna.'

'That's strange,' said Colonel Bligh, looking straight into the fire. 'Then you do not know that the little fellow, the baby, is ill.'

'I had no idea of it.'

'Well, I am sorry to say the little fellow is *very* ill. I had not seen Mrs. Piers for two or three days, so yesterday I called to say good-bye. She came down and asked me to see you, and say she had written to beg you to come to her if you could, as she was so alone. I do not think Mrs. Piers has any intimates in Paris—except, of course, Madame Moscynska.'

'Madame Moscynska!' repeated Laura, feeling stupefied with a sudden sense of evil.

'Ah! Princess Moscynska,' said Mrs. Crewe, with an ineffable air. 'A very charming person.'

'Exceedingly charming,' returned Colonel Bligh, slightly elevating his eyebrows, 'but not exactly—a—sick-nurse.'

'What!' cried Laura. 'Did Winnie want me to help her with the baby?'

'So I understood; and I think she was considerably cut up that you neither wrote nor came.'

'Came! Oh, I am ready to start now. Do tell me the truth—is Winnie very, very unhappy?'

'She is, of course, anxious and uneasy,' returned Colonel Bligh, with another glance at Mrs. Crewe, who had risen to ring the bell.

Laura was silent, thinking 'He has more to tell me, but does not like to speak out.'

'Really, the negligence of servants is intolerable,' cried Mrs. Crewe; 'I must call to Collins to bring the lamp,' and she moved towards the door.

Colonel Bligh started to his feet, first to open and then to close it carefully after her. Returning to the fireplace, he stood looking down into Laura's face with a keener expression than she thought his face could assume, and pulling his long moustaches.

'I scarcely know the exact scope of my instructions,' he said, after an instant's pause, 'but I think I may venture to say that if you really care about your cousin, now is the time to be with her—no one ever wanted help and sympathy more.'

'I will go at once,' said Laura, speaking with grave composure. 'But, Colonel Bligh—suggest it before Mrs. Crewe solely on account of the baby.'

He bent his head, and before he could speak again Mrs. Crewe re-entered.

'We shall have light in a moment,' she said. 'Pray sit down, Colonel Bligh; you have not told us half the news.'

'Thank you, I have just ventured to urge Miss Piers to start as soon as possible. Mrs. Piers wrote last Friday, nearly a week ago, and is much disappointed at receiving no answer. The child is in a very critical state, and she is alone.'

'Certainly, I am sure dear Laura will go. The Admiral can have no objection. It is shocking weather for travelling. When the dear infant is better, it will be interesting to see Paris.'

'When can you start?' asked Colonel Bligh, who seemed restless, earnest, and altogether unlike the careless man-about-town Laura took him for.

'It is nearly four o'clock,' she said, rising to look at the pendule as Collins entered with the lamp. 'There is an evening train, is there not, by Folkestone and Boulogne?'

'The tidal train leaves Charing Cross at 8.30 this evening,' returned Colonel Bligh, 'and you will reach Paris about nine to-morrow morning.'

'This evening!' almost screamed Mrs. Crewe. 'It is impossible. You cannot pack up in the time; and that tiresome woman has not sent home your winter dress; and

no one to see you off. Excuse me, Colonel Bligh—but this dear girl is *especially* under my care. I could not let her travel alone.'

'Dear Mrs. Crewe, there is no help for it. I must go. I will start by the tidal train this evening, Colonel Bligh.'

'If you will allow me, I will be at the station to put you in charge of the guard. There is really nothing to fear from such a journey, Mrs. Crewe. Here is the address. Piers has put up at a private hotel not known to the general horde of English travellers; but I will give you full directions when we meet this evening.'

'Thank you very much.'

'But Laura, my dear, I cannot——'

'I will leave this house at seven, to ensure being in good time,' continued Laura, laying her hand kindly, but imperatively, on Mrs. Crewe's.

'I told her you would come!' cried Colonel Bligh, 'though I felt by no means sure.'

'How could she doubt me?' said Laura.

'Your silence——' began the Colonel; then interrupting himself, 'but I will not stay to prevent your preparations. You will find me waiting at Charing Cross somewhere about 8 to 8.15.'

'Will you telegraph to Winnie that I am coming?' asked Laura.

'Telegraph?'—a moment's hesitation—'yes, yes; of course I'll telegraph. And now I will wish you good-morning. Do not be uneasy, Mrs. Crewe; I assure you there is no difficulty whatever on so much travelled a route. I would offer to escort Miss Piers myself if I thought there was'

'Gracious goodness, Laura!' exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, the instant they were alone, 'this is really a wild-goose chase. I am sure no one feels more for poor dear Winnie than I do, ~~but~~—he has her husband, and a first-rate nurse, and everythink money can buy. Why she wants to race you off in the snow and cold and wretchedness of a bad November, I ~~cannot~~ understand. She never sends for you except when shis in trouble. How do you think Denzil will like your ~~racing~~ off in this—this wild manner? Really, Laura, you ought to consider——'

'I have no fear of Denzil's disapprobation. Will you kindly see to these notes being posted, and—'

'Oh yes, of course. Really, the headstrong self-will of young people is amazing—you do not pay the smallest attention to my remonstrances. And what will you travel in? Your waterproof is quite shabby, and your winter jacket a last year's concern; and to go among these grand people in your old things shows a want of proper spirit.'

'Dear, kind friend,' cried Laura, starting up and throwing her arms round her, 'do not blame me; my whole heart is bent on this journey, and when I return I shall have so much to tell you.'

'Well, well,' returned Mrs. Crewe, always mollified by a hug and a kiss. 'I am a fool about you, Laura; you do what you like with me. Be sure you wrap up well.'

Mrs. Crewe thenceforward became most active in furthering Laura's preparations, albeit complaining all the time.

About five the Admiral came in, and Laura ran up to his room to explain matters. He, like Mrs. Crewe, raised many objections to Laura's travelling alone. But something in her ardent resolution, the controlled eagerness, the tender haste which pervaded her manner, carried him away also; and, a little past seven o'clock, she found herself ready for the road.

She was feverishly anxious to have a few uninterrupted words with Colonel Bligh. At last she was off, escaped from the Admiral's last injunctions, from Mrs. Crewe's voluminous embrace.

Lost in thought, the long drive from Westbourne Park to Charing Cross seemed quickly accomplished, and it was with a sense of comfort and protection she recognised Colonel Bligh at the entrance of the station.

'You are quite up to time,' he exclaimed, as he handed her out. 'We will get your ticket and see the luggage weighed, then I shall have a few minutes to speak to you.'

This accomplished, he led Laura to a remote sofa in the general waiting-room.

'I am greatly relieved to see you fairly on your way to Mrs. Piers,' he said; 'she wants you terribly. By the way, I did *not* telegraph.'

'Why?' asked Laura, with an odd feeling that she knew he would not.

'Oh, well, I had my reasons. It would not hasten your arrival, and she will perhaps be less disturbed. But tell me, do you *know* Madame Moscynska?'

'Very little.'

'Do you admire her?'

'No. I have a curious feeling of repugnance to her.'

'Ha! Then I suppose she will not bamboozle you; and I need not be afraid to say that she is the devil's own *intrigante*. I am not strait-laced, but there are certain things I cannot swallow. You will judge for yourself, however; and—and—I say—Miss Piers, would you mind writing me a line—to the club, you know—just to say how you find Mrs. Piers is going on? I saw a good deal of her at Vienna, and, by Jove! she is an angel! You will not mind sending me word if the little fellow pulls through?'

'I will write to you if you wish,' returned Laura unhesitatingly; 'but I hope you will see us all soon in London.'

'So do I. I wish Piers had some friend who could just put him straight, or say a "word in season," as the parsons call it.'

'Could you not offer him the advice you think he needs?' said Laura, looking curiously at him.

'No, by Jove! I am the last person he would listen to; but—'

'Now then for the Folkestone train!' cried a porter, putting his head into the waiting-room.

Colonel Bligh placed Laura carefully in the carriage, and then held a private conference with the guard, who came to the carriage and promised most emphatically to 'look after the young lady.' Then the whistle sounded. Colonel Bligh, shaking Laura's hand cordially, and saying, 'You will be sure to write,' stepped back and raised his hat, as the train moved out of the station at rapidly-increasing speed, dashing away into darkness and the unknown future.

At last, in the dim cold light of a drizzly morning,

Laura found herself at the Gare du Nord, somewhat puzzled and stunned by the vociferations of guards, douaniers, porters, and cochers.

CHAPTER XLIII.

PARIS had been to Laura the object of many a day-dream. To see that queen of cities, to wander through her galleries and museums, to visit the various scenes of the mighty drama enacted there nearly a hundred years ago, had long been a cherished desire ; and here she was, driving over the wet slippery asphalt pavement, scarcely conscious that she was in the famous city, so absorbed was she by the idea that in a few minutes more she should see Winifrid. In what plight would she find her ? and how would she be received by Reginald ?

The hotel was *en papillotes* at that early hour ; two *garçons* in their shirt-sleeves were sweeping the entrance-hall and stairs ; a lady in a dressing-gown was looking through a huge account-book in the bureau, and a newsboy with a bundle of papers under his arm was talking to a stout man of imposing appearance who had not yet found time to shave. This last personage approached the *faucre*, and in answer to Laura's questions replied, 'Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Piers and suite were in the house ; but he feared Mrs. Piers could not see any one. A great misfortune had just happened ; the poor little baby died the night before last, and madame was inconsolable.'

'The baby dead !' cried Laura, overpowered by this news. 'This is terrible ! Tell Mrs. Piers's maid that I am here.'

'Ah ! *Mees Piers*,' said the man, reading her card. 'Oh ! pardon, mademoiselle ! *Par ici*—this way, mademoiselle ;' and he led her up more than one flight of stairs to a well-furnished bedroom. 'I will call the *femme de chambre* and have a fire lit. What will mademoiselle take for breakfast ?'

'Thank you. I must see Farrar before anything.'

'I will send for her at once ; she is not yet up.'

The poor dear little baby dead ! The tender life but

scarce begun so soon cut short ! What a blow to Winifrid ! She waited with infinite impatience until the lady's maid should make her appearance, and noted in a vague, half-unconscious way the foreign look of the room and its furniture—the stiff, uninhabited aspect of the apartment. All sense of personal strangeness and isolation was swallowed up in her profound compassion for Winnie.

At last the door opened to admit the maid.

'Indeed, Miss Piers, I am glad you have come,' she cried ; 'my poor dear mistress did so watch for you. Ah, she is quite broken-hearted ! She just sat like a statue all yesterday ; we could hardly get the dead baby out of her arms. Now she is sleeping at last, and I must not wake her ; but it will be a comfort to her to find you here.'

'Oh no, do not disturb her. I am so terribly grieved for her and the poor dear little baby.'

'And he had grown such a fine fellow ! such a beauty ! Ah, Miss Piers, it is not for me to speak, but we have been all wrong since that—that Madame Moscynska turned up at Franzensbad. I never could abide her ; and nurse, she thinks no one ever was so grand and good, and what not ; but she is rather an ignorant woman, is nurse. Oh, how I wish you had been with my poor mistress when baby began to get bad !'

'There was some mistake about the letter,' began Laura ; but a sudden fit of caution seized her, and she stopped.

'Then you did not get it in time ?' said Farrar, pausing at the door, with a somewhat anxious look in her face.

'No, or I should have been here before.'

'That is odd,' said Farrar, and left the room.

While making a hasty toilette, and drinking her coffee, Laura thought intensely. She felt that there was a difficult task before her ; that she must be cautious but fearless. Farrar's words suggested mischief, all the more threatening for its vagueness.

Farrar soon returned, and led the way to her mistress's room.

Winnie stood in the middle of it, wrapped in a long dressing-gown, her abundant nut-brown hair hanging loose, deadly pale, her large blue eyes dilated with a strange, almost stern look, inexpressibly painful to Laura.

'Winnie, dear, dear Winnie!' was all she could say, as she threw her arms round her.

Winifrid was very still ; she slowly raised her hands and clasped them round Laura's neck, resting her head on her shoulder.

'You could not come before?' she said, with a deep sigh.

'I never had your letter, Winnie—never knew anything of your sore trouble till yesterday, when Colonel Bligh called. I came as quickly as I could.'

'I knew he would not fail me, nor you either.' She paused, and Laura felt her clasp tighten and her heart beat vehemently. 'What shall I do, Laura? What shall I do? I have nothing left.'

'Of course, dearest, you feel desolate now ; but time will bring consolation.'

'You do not know—you cannot know,' resumed the poor young mother. 'Ah, Laura, he was so sweet ! he began to know me so well ; and he had Reginald's eyes—the Reginald I used to love and that loved me !'

'Lie down again, dear Winnie, and I will watch by you,' said Laura. 'You are worn out ; a few hours' sleep would do you so much good.'

'Sleep ! I never thought I should sleep again, but I did ; I have only just woke up, and everything seems worse. I do not want to sleep, or rather, I wish I might never wake. But come and see my poor little baby ;' and letting Laura go, she opened a door which led into the child's room.

He lay so softly fair, in the satin-lined coffin, that but for the pallor of the still rounded cheek, he might have been in the profound sleep of infancy. Laura's eyes welled over as she gazed at the little marble face, so happy in its expression of intense repose.

'It is my last look,' said the mother, still tearless, with a strange composed voice. 'The people will soon be here to take him away—away for ever ! they take away the dead so soon here.'

'Oh, Winnie, dear Winnie !' cried Laura again, clasping her in her arms, 'it is terrible to see you like this ! If our good kind mother could look upon you now,

how heart-broken she would be! she loved you so much.'

Something in the allusion touched a tenderer chord than had yet been struck. Winifrid shivered all through her frame, and then she burst into an agony of weeping, trembling so violently that Laura was frightened; when the first force of this torrent of grief passed over, she persuaded her to lie down again, and ran for Farrar to assist her mistress.

When Laura thought the mourner had dropped off to sleep, she said softly to Farrar:

'Where is Mr. Piers?'

Winifrid turned immediately.

'He is not up yet, I think,' she said; 'he has not been well.' Then she closed her eyes and lay quite motionless.

Laura still kept watch, very weary, and feeling sure there was much more to hear. The sort of speechless despair in Winifrid's face when she first saw her made a profound impression on her friend. And where was Reginald? How would he greet her? She had an instinctive presentiment he would not be pleased at her coming. But that was nothing to her; she felt her mission was to protect Winnie. Thinking thus, round and round the same circle, Laura leaned back in the deep low chair by Winnie's bed, and for a time lost consciousness.

She was roused by Winnie.

'What o'clock is it, dear Laura?'

'A few minutes past eleven.'

'Ah! then he is quite gone! If I had not slept I might have had one more look at that sweet little face. But he was to be taken away at half-past nine. Do ring for Farrar; she will tell.' A fresh burst of tears, this time gentler and quieter, interrupted her. 'Ah, Farrar!' she exclaimed, as her maid came in, 'have they taken him away?'

'Yes, ma'am, nearly an hour ago,' replied Farrar soothingly.

'Then it is indeed all over!' cried Winifrid, burying her face in the pillow, while convulsive sobs shook her frame.

Farrar brought eau-de-Cologne and water, and bathed her temples, and tried to administer consolation of the ordinary kind. At last her mistress said hastily :

'Thank you, Farrar; you are very kind; you may go now:' then, as she left the room, she again stretched out her hand for Laura's. 'You will stay with me,' she whispered, 'until we go back to England, at all events; you are my only friend—I lost everything when I lost my boy.'

'Your husband, dearest, is still left to you.'

'My husband—oh yes, my husband! I do not forget him,' she returned, with a deep sigh, and remained long silent and motionless. Then again rousing herself, she suddenly began on a subject so far removed from the present that Laura was startled. 'Do you remember my birthday—my last birthday at the dear old Rectory? How we had luncheon in the woods, and my mother gave all the school-children tea in the servants' hall? Poor mother! it was the last birthday she was with me. Herbert slipped into the mere, and Reginald pulled him out. I do not seem to have any clear recollection of Reginald before that day, although I know he used to be with us every summer. Do you remember it all, Laura?'

'Yes; how well I remember it!' said Laura, her eyes filling with tears.

'And now——' began Winifrid, then paused expressively, resuming in a strange rambling way her reminiscences of her girlish days, every now and then breaking off to describe the charm and promise of her poor lost baby, Laura answering in monosyllables, or by a silent caress, and beginning to feel faint and weary. At length Farrar made her appearance, bearing a tray with some food and wine for her mistress.

'Mrs. Piers has not tasted anything since early yesterday morning, when Mr. Piers insisted on her swallowing some wine and biscuit. Do try and persuade her to eat a bit, ma'am; and you must be quite exhausted yourself. Miss Piers must have some refreshment, mustn't she, ma'am?'

'Oh yes, yes; I am so selfish in my grief; I did not think of you and the long journey you have taken for me, dear, dear Laura. Go and eat; if you will, I will try, too.'

'I was thankful to see my poor lady shedding tears at last,' said Farrar, who was a somewhat old-fashioned type of abigail, simple and kindly; 'she has had enough to break her heart,' she added in a significant tone, which Laura perceived, but would not notice, as she followed Farrar into a small dining-room at the farther end of a long corridor. 'Yes, they have laid for two,' said Farrar, as she opened the door. 'Now do, miss, eat something, and take a glass of wine.'

As soon as she was gone a door which led into the *salon* opened very gently, and Madame Moscynska, in outdoor dress, walked quietly into the room with the air of being at home.

The door was opposite Laura as she sat at table, and before the Polish Princess could veil her countenance in polite blankness Laura caught a flash of angry surprise in her peculiar eyes.

'Miss Piers! I had no idea you had arrived! How glad I am to see you! Do not let me disturb you,' said Madame Moscynska softly. 'Indeed, I will join you; I promised to be with Mrs. Piers when the poor little baby was taken away, and to receive the sorrowing father when he returned from the funeral. Mrs. Piers was sleeping when I came, and continues to sleep, I am glad to hear. I suppose the letter to you was delayed or went astray?'

'I suppose so,' said Laura; 'the moment I knew my cousin wished for me I set out.'

'I always said you would,' said Madame Moscynska, with a soft, approving smile; 'only the delay puzzled us. Poor dear Mrs. Piers—the Dowager, I mean—she will be dreadfully grieved when she gets my letter; I wrote yesterday at Mr. Piers's request; she was quite wrapped up in her little grandson. You must be very tired after your rapid journey—at night, too.'

Laura said she did begin to feel a little weary, looking, while she spoke, with a dim, wondering sense of distrust, yet of admiration, at the inscrutable face opposite to her, comparing her own homely aspect to the *recherché* elegance of Madame Moscynska's winter costume, and wondering if this gentle, courteous woman could be the unprincipled *intrigante* Winnie believed. But as she looked and thought, the doubt

resolved itself into certainty. Yes, there was a something repellent in the covert watchfulness of those sleepy eyes, in the hardness of the well-cut mouth. Was it possible that she was taking advantage of this terrible time, when Winnie, prostrated with grief, was incapable of resistance, to force herself into an appearance of intimacy ?

'I must see if Mrs. Piers still sleeps,' Laura said at length, taking advantage of a pause in the easy flow of Madame Moscynska's talk, in which, without asserting anything, she conveyed the idea of having been the stay and comforter of both parents. 'Shall I tell Mrs. Piers you are here ?'

'No, thank you ; I spoke to nurse, who had just come downstairs from having a little sleep. She will let Mrs. Piers know.'

Before she could finish her sentence the door by which Laura had entered the *salle à manger* opened hastily, and Reginald stood in the doorway, looking from one to the other with an air of surprise.

At sight of him Laura's heart beat and her colour rose ; she went forward to greet him, and he met her half-way.

'Ah, Laura ! what a good soul you are to come all this way just to please Winnie ! I always said you were A 1 —didn't I ?' with a little familiar nod to the Princess. 'This is a melancholy ending to the poor little boy,' he went on. 'Winnie is awfully cut up ; still, she need not have imposed such a journey upon you ! She will be going back to London in a few days, and you could have seen as much as you like of each other.'

'But you know I do not count the cost, when I can do anything for Winnie,' said Laura. 'I only wish her letter had reached me in time.'

'Well, you have done her good already,' said Reginald. 'I have just been in to see her, and tell her that everything had been as well done as we could manage. I do not know what we should have done without Madame la Princesse !'

'You make too much of my poor efforts,' she returned, with a curious upward look at him. 'Would it not be well to warn Miss Piers that your poor dear wife's nerves have received such a shock, she sometimes shows symptoms

of mental alienation?—distrust of and aversion to her best friends, those whose society was previously most acceptable. Myself, for instance—you would scarcely believe it, she has suddenly evinced the strongest aversion to *me*.'

'This is terrible!' exclaimed Laura, looking straight at Reginald.

'Oh, you need not take fright!' he returned, in an odd, indifferent sort of manner. 'She will come round and be herself again. And you are such a rock of sense, Laura, you will understand how to deal with her.'

'There can be little difficulty in doing so; we both know every light and shade in her character,' said Laura, who was greatly impressed by the change in Reginald.

He was looking ill, pale, languid, with haggard eyes, a tinge of something like mockery in his smile, and carelessness in his manner. There was more effort than usual in his politeness to herself, and she felt keenly that she was far from welcome.

'Characters change a good deal with circumstances,' Reginald was saying while these observations suggested themselves to Laura. 'I assure you,' he continued, addressing Madame Moscynska, 'I consider Laura's friendship for my wife a triumphant refutation of all that wiseacres have said about feminine attachments—they are quite devoted to each other. How much of it is due to a certain aptitude for dominating on one side, and accepting domination on the other, is beyond me to calculate.'

'That must be the result of habit,' said Madame Moscynska. 'Mrs. Piers never gave me the idea of being ready to accept domination.'

'I am, then, the dominating power in our association?' said Laura. 'That is a new position for me.'

'You are much stronger than Winnie,' said Reginald carelessly, again filling his glass. 'But now that you are here, Laura, it will be very nice for her to have your company on her journey back. It has been all deucedly unfortunate; the loss of the little fellow has half turned her head—indeed, I am awfully cut up myself!'

'I cannot stay long, as you know,' said Laura, startled by the possibilities shadowed forth in this speech; 'and when she has *you* she can hardly want me.'

'I know, I know,' said Reginald impatiently. 'But I have an engagement to visit a famous racing establishment near Presburg, where I have a chance of picking up some wonderful additions to the Pierslynn stud; so there is no use in my going over to England merely to come back again.'

Laura had opened her lips to make an indignant reply, when a curious look in Madame Moscynska's eyes, as though she was watching for what would come next, made her pause and say simply:

'I am always glad to be of use to Winnie—or to you—and, as she is awake, I will go to her now.'

She rose and left the room as she spoke, but, closing the door hastily, caught her dress in it. Opening it to free herself, the words 'surprised' from Madame Moscynska and 'infernal nuisance' from Reginald caught her ear. Was *she* the infernal nuisance? that was little matter. This intention to let Winnie return to England alone was a symptom of estrangement that thoroughly alarmed her; so did Madame Moscynska's subtle hint respecting temporary alienation of mind.

Laura thrilled for a moment with the idea that even she herself might have been put on a wrong scent had it not been for Winnie's revelations in London. Now she was forearmed, and resolved not to let Reginald leave his wife without some attempt to open his eyes to the selfish indifference of his conduct.

CHAPTER XLIV.

IT was the third day after the poor little baby had been laid in its last resting-place, and the mother's first vehement grief had settled down into deep silent sadness.

Laura had vainly attempted to interest her in various subjects, and urged her at least to write to her mother-in-law, from whom she had received a long tearful letter, full of affectionate sympathy. Winifrid rejected all suggestions, and entreated Laura to write to Mrs. Piers for her.

'I cannot; yet I do not like her to be neglected, and I am sure Reginald will not write.'

'Why ?'

'Because he never does anything he can possibly help, except to amuse himself. What has changed him, Laura ? I often sit and wonder, when I am alone.'

'But is he so changed, Winnie ?'

'Can you not see that he is ? He only dined with us once since you came ; he cannot bear to be without company. To be sure, I am dull and wearisome, but that is not my fault. He used to be so full of kind consideration. I think at times that some spell has been laid upon him.'

'That is nonsense, Winnie dear ; what do you mean ?'

'I mean that I have quite given up the struggle I was so fierce and eager about when we parted, Laura. I cannot stand against that woman's influence. I suppose there is something wanting in myself, some power of sympathy, of companionship ; I cannot find out what. Once I fancied I was everything to him ; I end by being nothing.'

'Are you not morbid and worn out with grief, dear Winnie, to fancy such things ?'

'Yes, I daresay I am ; but it is not just now these ideas have taken hold upon me. Only while I had my baby I had something to endure for, to keep up appearances for ; I was determined to bear much, everything save one.'

'And what was that ?'

'To have the society of a bad, treacherous, relentless woman forced upon me, in order to shelter *her* reputation. We shall never be the same to each other !'

She stopped with a deep sigh.

'Winnie dear, this is too dreadful. "Never" is a terrible word, and you say it so quietly.'

'The quiet of exhaustion,' she returned. 'If you only knew the fiery battle I fought at Franzensbad and Vienna ! It is a relief to talk to you, Laura, you are so safe ; and I do not want to abuse Reginald. He was so dear, so charming to me once ! and I do not seem to have lost my affection for him, though lately it has been rudely shaken.'

She paused, looking out of her large soft eyes as if at some distant object.

'You know,' she resumed, in the same sad monotone,

'we were all well and happy at Franzensbad. Then Reginald went away to a hunting-party at Graf Wielizka's place. He stayed longer than I expected, and only wrote twice. I did not mind that; he seemed enjoying himself, and I was happy with Helen. He did not return till two days after she left; then he looked ill, and was not quite like himself. The evening after he came back he was talking very pleasantly, describing the shooting and the dinners, when he suddenly exclaimed, "By the way, our friend Madame Moscynska turned up at Schloss Wielizka; the Gräfin is her cousin." I felt as if I had a sudden stab; I could not speak, and he went on: "Madame Wielizka is in delicate health, so she begged me to find quarters for her here; and the Princess and that singing fellow Bariatowski are coming on Thursday: we must see what we can find for them to-morrow."

'Was Reginald not aware of your objection to Madame Moscynska?' asked Laura.

'He was; but I then opened my mind fully to him. I told him I could not, and would not associate with this woman! I promised that I would do nothing rude and create no *esclandre*, if on his part he would promise to come away within a week after she came.'

'Did he promise?' asked Laura.

'He did, laughing as if it were a silly whim of mine; provided, he said, I was still in the same mind after the arrival of so pleasant a party. Well, they came. I fulfilled my part; though as stiff and distant as possible, I did not *cut* Madame Moscynska. Then a dreadful struggle began. I could not induce Reginald to leave; I had almost to stay in my own room to avoid that woman. I had scenes with my husband; I found he was losing heaps of money to those dreadful men who are about Madame Moscynska. I wrote you some account of all this; but you never had the letter, it seems. It was a dreadful time! I never knew if I were acting wisely or not. I felt I was right, yet I was perpetually being put in the wrong. At last Reginald said one morning that we should start for Vienna. She did not appear there, and I tried to be friendly with Reginald, and sometimes he would be nice, and sometimes quite wildly gay; often I

feared he drank too much,—he had fallen among such dreadful people. After about three weeks we came on here, and found Madame Moscynska installed in the next street. I implored Reginald to come home. Then suddenly it came to me that I was losing myself in such a struggle, so I gave it up ; only I would not see Madame Moscynska. But when baby was ill, and I almost lost my head, she came in and out, and I am sure she gave the people in the hotel the idea of being my best friend. I wrote to you ; you did not come. One day—the last day—Farrar, who has been such a good kind help all through, rushed to me and said, “Colonel Bligh is in the *salon* alone ; beg of him to go and see Miss Piers in London ; I believe he is going to leave Paris.” I ran to him, and had just time to say I do not know what, when Reginald came in ; then I was back with baby, who soon ceased to cry or moan, and then there is a blank till I had the comfort of hearing your voice. Laura, you must stay with me !”

‘I will ! Winnie, I think I shall be able to help you. I will speak to Reginald.’

‘You had better not !’ said his wife despondingly. ‘Nothing can do any good. Is there a more desolate creature on earth than a wife left, as *I* am left, without hope, without redress ? For if another woman is more charming and suitable to my husband, can he help loving her better than he does me ? Only he ought not, and he *shall* not, force her upon me ; that I will resist.’

Laura was deeply moved, both by pity and indignation. She held a power unknown to any one, and she would use it unflinchingly. She curbed the indignant words which rose to her lips ; it would do Winnie no good to denounce her husband. How could Reginald be so cruel, so faithless ? Was it that the first deliberate choice of evil so deteriorated his moral nature that he could no longer discern between right and wrong ? She rose and walked to and fro.

‘Tell me,’ said Laura, pausing opposite to Winnie, ‘what is Madame Moscynska’s object in risking her character as she does ? She does not give me the idea of a woman who would sacrifice much for any one.’

'I think she likes him well enough, and she hates *me* more than she cares for him ; but, above all, she likes his money. I am sure he pays for quantities of things for her. She has no money, and is boundlessly extravagant. I believe if Reginald were poor she would leave him alone.'

'Winnie, try and put this out of your head for a little while. We must endeavour to rescue Reginald. Let us get away from Paris as soon as possible.'

'The sooner the better ; but I am afraid that Reginald has some scheme for returning to Austria. If he lets me go back to England without him, at such a time, it will be a slight I shall not forgive.'

'He will not think of it,' said Laura.

'Yes, Laura, he undoubtedly *thinks* of it. But I trust he may be kept from leaving me, because—I cannot tell you how I dread it. It would be a kind of hopeless break. Could the day ever come that I should not wish to *see* Reginald ? I am so young ; life is so long !'

'Life will bring brighter days,' returned Laura, with a quiet firmness of tone that gave momentary comfort to the sorrowing wife. 'Come out for a drive with me to-day ; it is dry, and there is no wind. You want all your strength and courage, for Reginald's sake. Ask him, this evening, to fix the day of our departure, and make all preparations. When he finds that things are in readiness, he will renounce his project of going to Austria, if he ever seriously entertained it.'

'If,' repeated Winnie, and paused. 'At least,' she resumed, 'you will not forsake me ; for you—you only—are left me.'

Laura had never felt before so heavy a sense of responsibility as now weighed upon her. The destinies of these friends, for both of whom she felt the truest interest, for one the tenderest affection, seemed thrust into her hands.

She trembled at the idea of acting on her own unassisted judgment in so difficult a matter. Yet the only chance of salvation for either Winnie or Reginald lay in secrecy and rapid action.

The one counsellor for whom she longed unutterably

was Denzil Crewe; and even were he beside her, she could not, must not, betray Reginald to him. But it was a comfort even to think there was one in whose judgment, in whose sound, healthy, instinctive common-sense, she could have such strong reliance. When would she have the unspeakable joy of having him near her again—to speak to, to be silent with, to listen to? When would the dreary days of separation be ended? How sure she felt that no such cloud as darkened Winnie's life could ever come between Denzil and herself! Looking back to her brief engagement with Reginald, she contrasted the strange unrest and excitement of that disturbed interval with the profound trust, the delicious tranquillity, of her present feelings, the delightful anticipation of real companionship and perfect understanding when at last Denzil and herself should share the same home and help each other in everyday cares and duties. To enjoy this highest type of love needs a certain degree of maturity. Youth is still in too sunny a ferment to allow of this clear, calm strength; something of trial, something of experience, are requisites for the rich mellowness of a love that is but a deeper, fonder friendship.

How would Denzil take her action in so important a crisis? Laura continued to muse. Well, she was sure; at all events, she must act on her own responsibility.

The air and a change from her own rooms seemed to do Winifrid good, and Laura drew her into conversation on various subjects not connected with the absorbing topics of the present. She longed to tell her of her engagement—this was a matter that she knew would effectually draw Winnie out of herself—but she dared not. It would complicate everything, and tend to alarm Reginald. So she talked of the Admiral and Mrs. Crewe, of their delightful visit to the seaside, of Dick's improving prospects, and Herbert's voyage. All went well till, turning into the Rue St. Honoré, a few paces from the corner of their own street, Laura recognised Reginald entering the door of a small private hotel.

'There is Reginald!' exclaimed Winifrid, her pale cheek flushing as she spoke. 'Do you know where he is going?'

'Where?' asked Laura mechanically, though she guessed at once.

'He is going to call on Madame Moseynska,' returned Winifrid; 'that is her hotel.'

'Let us only get him away to England,' Laura said at last. 'Ask him to-night after dinner. I will slip away, and you can coax him to fix the day. Are you sure Madame Moseynska really means to go with him? It seems too daring.'

Winifrid only shook her head, for Laura's question brought them to the door of their hotel.

There were some costly flowers in the *salon*, and Winifrid sat down at once in a low chair near the fire.

'It is very doubtful if Reginald will come in to dinner. If he does, I will do my best to persuade him to come with me, and fix next Wednesday or Thursday for our start. But, Laura, I see you think I judge Madame Moseynska too hardly. Perhaps, were I in your place, I should think the same; but you do not—you cannot conceive what she is.'

Winifrid rang the bell.

'Do you know if monsieur dines here to-day?' she asked, when the waiter appeared.

'I do not, madame. Monsieur was here about an hour ago, with the *commissionnaire* who brought these flowers, but he said nothing of dinner.'

'Very well. They are lovely flowers,' said Winnie, as the man left the room.

Dinner, however, had proceeded as far as dessert and coffee, when he came in, still in morning dress.

'Do not disturb yourselves,' he said. 'I have only looked in to ask how Winnie is after her drive. But I have promised to dine with Wielizka and Latour, and one or two others, just to talk over our plans. We do not dine till eight. I think you seem better for having gone out,' he continued, looking at his wife.

'Yes, thank you; I am better. What charming flowers, Reggie! The room looked quite bright when we came in.'

Reginald smiled, and poured himself out some wine.

'Where did you go?' he asked languidly.

'Into the Bois. Do you know, I feel so much stronger

that I am quite equal to start for England to-morrow. I wish, dear Reggie, you would fix the day to leave Paris.'

' You had better settle it yourself with Laura,' he returned indifferently.

' I confess I begin to be anxious to go back,' said Laura. ' You know I am not quite a free agent.'

So saying, she rose and left the husband and wife together.

There was a minute's awkward silence; and then Reginald, rising, went to the fireplace, and leaning against the mantelpiece, said :

' Well, then, when do you propose to start ?'

' I leave all arrangements to you,' returned Winifrid, with a slight quiver in her voice.

' Of course I will do whatever you want in the way of preparation,' he rejoined; ' but I cannot return to England for a month or two.'

' And you will let me return alone,' exclaimed Winnie, with a burst of indignation which shook her from head to foot; while her husband answered :

' You will have your favourite, Laura, to keep you company—Laura, whom you prefer to my friends.'

Winnie, conscious that every moment, every word was of importance, rose, and, coming to her husband's side, passed her arm through his caressingly.

' Reggie dear,' she said, with a pathetic quiver in her voice, ' what is any company to me compared to yours ? Do not let me go from you now ! Come with me ! I fear I have been selfish in my great grief, but I will rouse myself to make your home pleasant and cheerful. Can I not be your companion, as I used to be, even though I am not a clever woman of the world ?'

Reginald looked down into the sweet sad eyes so tenderly and imploringly raised to his, and his own softened as he put his arm round her and drew her close to him.

' That you certainly are not,' he said, not unkindly. ' But at least you must have learned that a man need not be the worse husband because he is not always tied to his wife's apron-string. I will not stay long—I will join you, in a month or six weeks, at Pierslynn ; or, if you would care to come with us, I am sure Madame Moscynska——'

'Can you seriously propose such a thing?' interrupted Winifrid, drawing away from him in indignant amazement.
'Are you so blinded as not to see it is an insult?'

'Please yourself,' returned her husband, shrugging his shoulders. 'I do not want to be harsh or unkind if you let me go my own way; only I do not choose to be held up as a fellow his wife can twist round her finger.'

'Are you influenced by so mean a motive?' exclaimed Winnie, yet struggling for self-control. 'Suppose you were weak and heartbroken, what would you think of *me* if I left you to amuse myself?'

'It is quite different,' he said impatiently. 'Besides, it is business as well as amusement that takes me to Wielizka's place. You know I have set my heart on making the Piers-Lynn stables renowned.'

'And I have set my heart on your returning with me, dear Reginald; you will not regret it once you are away from Paris. If you send me from you now, it will *never* be the same between us again!'

'Do not waste your energies, Winnie. I shall see you off on Wednesday or Thursday, and start on my own journey the day after.'

'With Madame Moseynska?' asked Winnie, in a low voice.

'Why not,' returned Reginald sharply, 'if she happens to be travelling in the same direction?'

Winnie stood quite still and silent: her husband looked at his watch.

'By Jove!' he said, 'I shall be late for dinner;' and he walked out of the room without another word.

CHAPTER XLV.

LAURA waited the result of Winifrid's interview with her husband in no small anxiety, although she did not greatly fear it. Reginald might be weak, vain, inconsiderate, but it was impossible he could be really cruel to so fair and sweet a wife as Winnie! Moreover, Madame Moscynska seemed neither young nor impulsive enough to make the

tremendous sacrifice that an overt *liaison* with a married man implies. No! if Winnie only had the courage and patience to speak frankly and lovingly to her husband, all must come right. It was more than an hour since she had left Reginald and his wife together, when the door opened to admit Winnie—Winnie looking unusually well, with colour in her cheeks, and brightness in her eyes. She closed the door after her, and drew a chair to the fire.

'How nice and comfortable you look,' she said quietly. 'To whom are you writing?'

'To Mrs. Crewe,' returned Laura, feeling uneasy at this beginning.

'Poor dear Mrs. Crewe! Tell her, Laura, we shall be in London on Wednesday or Thursday at furthest.'

'I am truly glad to hear it,' cried Laura, turning her chair so as to face the speaker.

'Are you? Well, under any circumstances, I am glad to leave Paris, but Reginald does *not* come with us. I have played my last card, Laura.'

'Do not say so. In such a game as yours there is no "last card"!' exclaimed Laura eagerly. 'Do not fix any day. Wait; try again.'

'It is useless; if I delay, he will leave me here. No; I have quite resolved to start either in the morning or evening of Wednesday. Had Reginald *asked* me to stay, I should have stayed, but he did not. I want to get away to London, and then I shall be able to think quietly, and decide what to do. Ah! what can I do?' this with a burst of irrepressible despair, immediately checked. 'I suppose I shall find out in time.'

'Winifrid, dear Winnie, forgive me, but were you patient and tender?'

'I think I was,' said Winifrid, and proceeded to repeat the conversation she had had with her husband, in a strange, quiet, mechanical way.

'But is this so very final?'

'I think it is,' returned Winnie, in the same quiet monotone. 'He was not cross or unkind in manner. He does not seem to think the matter worth exciting himself about; but he will not give up Madame Moscynska, and—I can do no more.'

'Let us see what to-morrow may bring forth,' said Laura, dismayed, yet not liking to let Winnie give up hope. 'As you parted without anger, at least open reproaches, I do not despair of the effect reflection may produce on Réginald.'

'Reflection! when he is with M. Wielizka and M. Latour! there is small room for reflection with such men. But there is no use in talking, and I want all my strength. Have you any book that would interest me? I do not want even to think, if I can help it.'

'It is nearly ten o'clock,' said Laura, infinitely distressed, yet not wishing to admit the fact of Winifrid's despair, 'and you have had unusual fatigue to-day. Suppose you go to bed, and I will find something among the railway books downstairs to read aloud to you; that may send you to sleep.'

'Finish your letter,' replied Winifrid. 'Tell Mrs. Crewe we shall leave Paris on Wednesday; and I will look for a book myself.'

She went to the door; then turning abruptly, came to Laura, threw her arms round her and clasped her tightly.

'How good and true you are to me! There is no one like you,—no one.'

Laura read long, in a carefully monotonous tone, and at last had the satisfaction of seeing Winifrid's dry, strained eyes close in sleep. She sat yet a while in deep thought beside her; and at length, after carefully arranging a night-light, and placing the bell where the sleeper could touch it on waking, she stole softly from the room, and, calling Farrar, told her her mistress was asleep. But Laura's mental work was not yet over; while she slowly undressed she revolved a scheme which needed all her courage.

She saw that it was hopeless to attack Réginald directly, but how would it do to speak to Madame Moscynska? She might not quite know all the serious mischief she was working. Even if heartless and unprincipled, she might have some regard for her reputation, and, after hearing a calm friendly explanation of the true state of affairs, she might see the wisdom at least of declining Réginald's escort.

It was a difficult and odious undertaking, but worth trying. She felt, rather than reasoned, that if the fascinating Princess withdrew from the intended expedition, Reginald could be more successfully dealt with ; but if he deserted his wife now, the breach would be hard to heal, while any estrangement between them would terribly aggravate the impending blow. Yes, she would risk the interview with Madame Moscynska. She might be laughed at for useless interference, she might fail ; but, if she succeeded, that would repay all risks.

The following morning was crisp and clear after the rain of the previous night. Winnie was calm and silent—still, as if the fever of hope was past. How to manage a couple of hours for herself alone was Laura's first difficulty.

'Have you anything for me to do this morning ?' she asked her cousin.

'No, dear, nothing. What do you wish yourself ?'

'Well, I should not like to leave Paris without a peep at the Louvre.'

'No ; of course you ought to see the pictures ; but I do not care to go. Farrar says there are some things we ought to get before we quit Paris. I will take her out with me, and perhaps take a little drive in the Bois ; it did me good yesterday.'

It was therefore arranged that Mrs. Piers should not wait luncheon for her cousin, and that Laura should linger as long as she liked in the galleries.

Laura never thought she could be among pictures and yet see so little of them as on that memorable morning ; she thought over her intended visit, and planned her opening speech. Once the subject was broached to Madame Moscynska, her difficulties, at least of one description, would be over. Never was an hour and a half so long as that which distilled in leaden moments before she permitted herself to return to the hotel.

'Madame had just driven away,' the waiter said, 'and left word that she would probably not be back till late.'

'I shall not come in now,' Laura said to the observant waiter, 'I can breakfast on my return ;' and, with a steady purpose and throbbing heart, she passed on to the unob-

trusive hotel which Winnie had pointed out as the residence of her foe.

Laura sent up her card, and was immediately admitted to a small but most comfortably-furnished room, sweet with the perfume of flowers, which were tastefully and liberally distributed on mantelpiece and consoles.

Madame Moscynska herself stood in the middle of the room, with Laura's card in her hand, and an expression of slight amused surprise on her countenance.

Though quite aware of the unpleasantness of the task she had undertaken, its difficulties never seemed so formidable as now that she stood face to face with the little delicate-looking, *spirituelle* woman who confronted her, in a picturesquely-designed morning-gown of dark-green Indian cashmere braided with gold, a scarf of white Brussels lace over her head, and a red camellia thrust between its folds at one side.

'Miss Piers,' said the Princess slowly, 'this is a surprise, a very agreeable surprise. Pray sit down, and tell me to what I owe this pleasure.'

She drew forward a chair with a curious smile, partly polite, partly defiant, and took a seat herself at the opposite side of the fire, with her back to the light.

'I have ventured to call upon you——' began Laura, feeling that she must collapse and pass into the conventional nothing of an ordinary visit under the tremendous ordeal of Madame Moscynska's peculiar searching eyes and cool unflinching gaze, unless she mentally nailed her colours to the mast and opened fire directly.

'Pray do not talk about "venturing,"' said Madame Moscynska blandly; 'is it my fault that we are not on pleasant terms of everyday intercourse? How is poor Mrs. Piers to-day? I was glad to find you persuaded her to go out.'

'I think the air and motion did her good.'

'No doubt; and you think of leaving Paris next week?'

'Even sooner, if—but it is of this I have come to speak to you, Madame Moscynska,' said Laura, gathering her forces. 'I feel it is a bold step—you may resent it; yet if I could clear away the—the sort of misunderstanding

which seems to have sprung up between my cousin and yourself, I think you would forgive me.'

'You are very good,' said the fair Pole, politely and guardedly; 'I am all attention.'

'Mrs. Piers wishes to leave Paris,' began Laura, her courage coming back gradually, 'but she does not like the idea of returning without her husband. It would convey the idea—of negligence—of—in short, separation, if, after her sad bereavement, he let her go home without him.'

'Ah!' said Madame Moscynska.

'She is under the impression,' said Laura, hurrying on with the succeeding sentences, while the colour rose in her cheek, 'perhaps an incorrect one, that as *you* are returning to Presburg, or some other place in Austria, Reginald intends to travel with you, and it is of this I have come to speak. I do not think you can be aware how deeply Mrs. Piers would resent such a step. Justly or unjustly, it would seem to her the most open neglect and defiance; and if *this* is the wife's opinion, you may be sure the world will see with her eyes, and judge both Mr. Piers and yourself severely; at any rate, the English world, which is still in a measure yours.'

'What do you wish me to do?' asked Madame Moscynska coldly.

'Make Reginald understand that if he goes to Presburg he must go alone.'

'So I am a bugbear to my sweet young friend,' said Madame Moscynska, with an amused smile. 'Really, Miss Piers, I must congratulate you on the pluck—that is the correct English term, is it not?—which emboldens you to come to a woman of my position, and say, "You are taking my cousin's husband from her, and endangering your own reputation." You can know very little of the world.'

'I daresay,' returned Laura, with more decision than she had hitherto shown. 'But I know you are doing mischief of which perhaps you are not aware, and I give you the benefit of the doubt by telling you the truth, and trusting to your sense of right to put a stop to it.'

The Princess looked at her for an instant, and Laura met her eyes with a glance as unflinching.

'What do you think Mr. Piers will say when I give

him a report of this flattering visit? Do you think it will make him more pliant, more inclined to endure the—let us say *tristesse* of a wife perpetually drowned in tears?

'If you choose to tell him, I shall understand the part you intend to play.'

'You are wonderfully attached to Mrs. Piers, are you not? and yet whispers have reached me that she played a treacherous part towards you.'

'Mrs. Piers never was anything but true, and I would dare much to secure her peace and happiness.'

Madame Moscynska looked at the carpet for a while musingly.

'You attribute more influence to me than I possess,' she said at length. 'I confess Mrs. Piers has roused *me*, and annoyed her husband, by her insolent and persistent rejection of my acquaintance. I have not been accustomed to such treatment; and, as Mr. Piers possesses to the full the masculine horror of being bored and opposed, she drives him to seek amusement in more congenial society. However, I am not implacable, and, as she has wisely chosen so good an envoy as yourself, I am willing to make terms.'

'I am no envoy,' cried Laura; 'I come here on my own responsibility.'

'Be that as it may,' resumed Madame Moscynska coolly, 'I will tell you to what I can agree. I had been hesitating between a visit to my uncle at Dairysford and a *séjour* with some friends who have famous sporting quarters near Presburg, when Mr. Piers kindly offered to escort me to Hungary, and as Mrs. Piers's absurd conduct made Dairysford a less desirable abode than it otherwise would be, I decided not to go there. If, however, I can be sure of her treating me with civility, and allowing the current of our lives to run smoothly and pleasantly, why, I have no objection to the neighbourhood of Pierslynn for the winter, and I have no doubt I—we—can persuade Mr. Piers to burn his yule log in the halls of his ancestors.'

She leant back in her chair as she finished speaking, playing with the ends of her lace scarf, surveying her visitor with calm, deliberate contempt.

The audacity of this speech roused the hottest indigna-

tion in Laura. She had indeed made a mistake in attempting to win over such a woman, and she feared that when Winifrid came to know of her visit, she would be terribly mortified. But at least Madame Moscynska's conduct would give her the right to back up Winnie in her resistance to the intimacy which her husband sought to force upon her.

There was nothing left but to end the interview, and she rose with a confused throng of angry, bitter thoughts crowding her brain.

'I have wasted your time and my own,' she said. 'You know I can promise nothing for Mrs. Piers; your own proposition—your own words—justify her conduct. If you are not inclined frankly and voluntarily to repair the mischief you have done, nothing I can say will make you.'

She turned towards the door as she spoke.

Madame Moscynska laughed a low pleasant laugh.

'But, my dear Miss Piers,' she said, 'is this not "much ado about nothing"—'

The door opening interrupted her, and Reginald Piers came in unannounced. At the sight of Laura he stood still, a look of the greatest surprise changing his usual indifferent expression to one more animated.

The Princess laughed again, this time with real merriment.

'Your *entrée* is quite dramatic. You little thought that I was to have the honour of a visit from your cousin when you left me this morning! Pray do not run away, Miss Piers. Let us have the murder out.'

Laura hesitated an instant, and then stood her ground.

'Yes,' she said, 'Madame Moscynska, I am quite willing you should tell everything to Reginald before me.'

'What the deuce is it all about?' cried Reginald, the colour rising to his cheek. 'What has brought you here?'

'A very serious mission,' said Madame Moscynska with quiet sarcasm. 'Miss Piers wishes to put us all right; she wishes to save you from the iniquity of a journey with so worthless a personage as myself. She wishes to enable your wife to have her own way in rejecting the friendship of your friend, and yet to receive the same devotion as though she yielded to your wishes; and as to myself, she

wishes to see me converted from the error of my ways, and finally shut out from contact with her cousin and herself.'

'By heaven, Laura!' cried Reginald, walking quickly across the room, 'you have made an awful fool of yourself! Pray, did Winifrid send you? or was it your own unassisted wisdom that planned this attack?'

'You are right, Reginald,' said Laura. 'I have indeed been foolish—foolish in disputing Winifrid's opinion—foolish in believing that such narrow views as mine could influence so accomplished a woman of the world as—your friend.'

'I hope I deserve the epithet,' said Madame Moscynska blandly. 'At any rate, I do not believe that in the eyes of *my* world a journey anywhere with Mr. Piers will injure my reputation.'

'And do not suppose that such meddling will effect anything except to widen the breach you seek to heal!' cried Reginald. 'Nothing shall make me forego my intention to show the slight civility of accompanying this lady on a long tedious journey, and you may tell my wife so.'

Madame Moscynska laughed triumphantly.

'Yes, Reginald,' said Laura, turning very pale, but facing him with steadfast eyes. 'There *is* something that may change your plans. Before you outrage your wife's feelings and risk your own reputation, read some letters that were addressed to me from Australia by a man who knew you well; you will then perhaps admit my right to dictate your conduct in this matter.'

As she spoke the anger died out of Reginald's face; he made a step forward and then stood still, a strange, startled look in his eyes. Laura kept the same position; and Madame Moscynska, raising herself from the attitude of repose which she had assumed, looked with curiosity from one to the other.

CHAPTER XLVI.

REGINALD, after an instant of stunned silence, laughed aloud.

'Well done, Laura! when you uncart a bogie you are

right to make it indefinite. What may these mysterious letters be, and from whom? Do they exist in a day-dream, or a nightmare?

'I will tell you all when we are alone,' said Laura, in a low voice; and, with a slight bow to Madame Moscynska, she left the room.

It was done, then! The irrevocable words, respecting which she had thought and planned so much, had burst from her without premeditation, almost involuntarily.

She walked on unconscious of the busy crowd around, the question perpetually beating as if with an iron hammer on her brain—'Have I done ill, or well, for Winifrid? Have I saved him—or driven him to recklessness? Have I loosened or contracted the hold that woman has on him? When I see him again, how shall I bear to look on him in his shame and degradation?'

If—if only the shameful reality could be kept from Winnie, if she could be left the comfort of loving her husband! How should she so guide the complication placed in her hands as to save all concerned?

For the moment she utterly lost sight of Madame Moscynska. She felt instinctively that her words had raised a terror in Reginald's heart that no witchery of woman could exorcise. Pondering these things, she walked on till she reached the hotel, when, with a half-unconscious design to escape contact and conversation, she passed the door and entered the Tuileries Gardens. She had descended the steps of the terrace, still harassed by agitated thoughts, when a quick step gained upon her, and, looking up, she saw Reginald beside her.

'Laura! I insist on your explaining the extraordinary speech you have just made.'

He was deadly pale, and his eyes looked wild and eager.

'My explanation involves a long story, Reginald. Where can I find an opportunity?'

'Here!' said he, with fierce impatience. 'We shall be safe from observation and listeners at the other side of the garden.'

They walked in silence to the terrace that overlooks the Seine, which is generally almost deserted.

'Now,' exclaimed Reginald, 'we are effectually alone—speak!'

Laura slowly raised her eyes to his.

'Reginald,' she said, 'I have known for some time that my grandfather was married. I have seen and copied the entry of his marriage in the register of St. Olave's Church. I am therefore the rightful owner of Pierslynn, and I am determined to assert my right.'

They had stopped beside the wall as if looking into the river beyond. Reginald drew back a step; a wave of colour rushed to cheek and brow, and, clutching his hands on the light cane he carried, he exclaimed :

'Great God! is this revenge?'

'No,' returned Laura sadly; 'it is justice.'

'But how do you mean to prove that the entry in the register you have seen is that of your grandfather Geoffrey Piers's marriage? The name is not so very uncommon,' said Reginald, looking intently at her, and casting from him the fragments of his cane, which he had unconsciously snapped in two.

'Because the fact of the marriage, with the place and date corresponding to the entry, is communicated to the woman in whose house Geoffrey Piers and his supposed mistress are known to have lodged, and where my father was afterwards born, in a letter which is in my possession.'

'It is a forgery!' exclaimed Reginald hastily. 'How did it come into your hands?'

'I found it in the keeping of a man to whom I was directed by——'

She paused, almost terrified at making the last avowal which would show Reginald that she knew all his treachery.

'A letter written just before his death by a man whom you knew—James Holden. He told me, what I would rather forfeit many fortunes than know, that you and he together visited the church, and examined the register—so—so— Ah, heaven, Reginald! what tempted you?'

She broke off, almost choked with sobs.

'The lying traitor! How can you believe a word such a fellow would write?'

'Reginald,' said Laura, in a low earnest voice, 'it is useless to argue. I know my rights, and I will maintain

them. God knows how bitter it is to me to know all this, but——'

'It is all over with me,' interrupted Reginald, turning suddenly and sitting down on a bench by which he paused. 'I am at your mercy.'

He leant his elbows on his knees, supporting his head on his hands, and gazing away into the blank disgraced future with a look of such hopeless despair that Laura's heart ached for him.

'You cannot believe that I will ever be merciless to Winnie or to you. Her lot is bound up with yours.'

'My God, Laura!' cried Reginald, turning to her, 'your obstinacy in refusing to marry me has ruined us both. By heaven! I never intended to wrong you, Laura. I intended to give you Pierslynn and myself into the bargain, for you loved me in those days; only I was such an infernal idiot that I lost you.'

'Is it possible *you* can be such a traitor to the sweetest wife a man could have as for an instant to wish me in her place? How can you be false to *her*, even in thought? I cannot express my pity and indignation. Your very senses seem blunted; and I loved you so much once, Reggie, that I believe it costs *me* more to tell you this terrible history than *you* to hear it.'

'You were always different from other women, and I still trust you, Laura; yet life is over for me. I wish to God I was out of it all, and lying at the bottom of the river there!' he said bitterly, as he rose and leant over the parapet. 'I have never known an hour's real happiness from the day you broke with me; though I was wild with joy when I won Winnie. She is all you say—yet I always dreaded that you should find me out.'

There was silence for a few minutes. Laura felt her tears welling over as she noticed the crushed look his whole face and figure had assumed. At length he roused himself, and exclaimed:

'If, Laura, you are inclined to be friendly and forgiving, we may compromise matters; we might quietly share the property during our joint lives. I might relinquish a couple of thousand a year, and leave a declaration that would secure the inheritance to your

children should you ever marry. We might live abroad a good deal, and no one be any wiser.'

Laura shook her head.

'No, Reginald; you must leave the terms to *me*. I must have a far more equitable arrangement. But it is time we returned. I shall write out my plan and suggestions. You have no alternative but to agree to what I propose, except so far as your legal knowledge may enable you to improve upon my ideas. Nothing can be done here. Return with us to London, and try to soothe Winnie; she is your best friend, your best defence; and she loves you still—so much.'

He did not answer till they had walked a few paces.

'*I am* in your hands,' he said; 'but, tell me, are you absolutely certain you never let the smallest hint of this infernal affair ooze out?'

'Never!' exclaimed Laura; 'your honour is as dear to me as my own. I will save it yet.'

'My honour!' repeated Reginald, with unutterable bitterness. 'Look here, Laura; I owe Wielizka some money, and—and—the Princess, too—not much—some bets at cards, you know.'

'I trust not a great deal; but, for Heaven's sake, get clear from them before we start.'

'You must wait a day or two.'

'Settle that with your wife.'

Another pause. The gray mist of a November afternoon was rising softly among the dark-brown trunks and bare twigs of the trees; a dull continuous roll from the streets pervaded the air.

'I ought to thank you, Laura,' said Reginald, as they approached the exit from the gardens—he spoke in a constrained voice. 'I see you are generous; but the bitterness, the disgrace of the whole thing, rage at my short-sighted folly, poison my soul. I am incapable of anything but a blind fury against myself—against everything.'

Laura could not reply; how could she reconcile him to himself? Yet her just anger was fading before a rising pity for the criminal.

'Let us try to wipe out the past,' she said. 'Of one

thing be sure ; I will guard you from suspicion ; but you must be guided by me.'

Reginald bent his head sullenly.

'I shall see you this evening,' he said. 'We must keep everything dark to Winnie ; but I will leave you now, Laura ; I—I must be alone.'

He turned abruptly, and walked quickly away in the direction of the river. Laura looked after him with a momentary uneasiness, but soon reassured herself. All Reginald's rage was regret for failure and detection, not remorse.

Her chief sensation was relief that the dreaded avowal had been got through. Yet had she not felt the pangs of shame more keenly than the offender ? Did he indeed realise that she was determined to assert her rights ? His rather audacious proposal to give her about a third of her own did not look like it.

These thoughts brought her to the door of their hotel ; and, as Winifrid had not yet returned, she took refuge in her own room.

'Laura dear, are you feeling unwell ?' said Winnie's kindly voice at the door, after a space of quiet, how long Laura did not know.

'Come in. I had a slight headache,' she returned, a mere nothing.'

'A picture-gallery is always fatiguing,' said Winifrid, walking to the fireplace and putting her foot on the fender. She was very pale ; her heavy eyes, the sad curve of the sweet mouth, all bespoke hopeless depression.

'You are tired too, are you not ?'

'Yes, a little,' with a sigh. 'We did a good deal of business, Farrar and myself ; we got sundry little presents. I need not forget my friends, even though I feel as if I had done with the world.'

'You have not done with the world yet, dear Winnie,' returned Laura cheerfully. 'I trust there are brighter days in store for you.'

'You are looking brighter, at any rate,' said Winifrid, gazing at her more attentively. 'There is some sort of change in your face—dear old face that I know so well ! Have you heard anything new ?' with a little eagerness.

'No, nothing whatever new. Let me see what you have been buying.'

As on the previous day, Winnie and Laura sat down *tictac-tac*; but they had scarce finished their soup when Reginald joined them.

'I did not intend to be so late,' he said, placing himself at table; 'or are you extra punctual?'

Winifrid was silent. Laura made some slight reply respecting the difference between watches, and dinner proceeded somewhat silently.

Reginald addressed himself principally to his wife; asked with languid but kindly interest where she had been; and Laura could not help observing, avoided her eyes as much as possible.

When coffee had been served and the waiter departed, Reginald suddenly observed—playing with his spoon and looking rather steadily at the table-cloth—'If you do not mind waiting till Thursday, Winifrid, I will go to London with you. I find the spring is a better time to visit the Zaradoski stables than the present season, and I daresay there is plenty to do at Pierslynn.'

He brought out this last word with an effort perceptible to Laura.

Winnie's eyes sparkled for a moment, but the light quickly faded as she replied:

'Of course, Reggie, I will wait any time you wish, so long as you fix it.'

'Very well—Thursday morning, then; we can stay a few days in London and see my mother.'

'Certainly, that will be very nice; and, Laura dear, you must come on with us to Pierslynn,' cried Winifrid, who could hardly believe her ears; 'you do not know how charming Pierslynn is in winter. By the way—for she had suffered too much to believe readily that her troubles were over—is Lord Dereham to have a large party this year?'

Laura understood this leading question.

'I believe not. I did hear he was to winter at Nice.'

Another brief silence; then Reginald shivered visibly, and pressed his hand to his head.

'I think I have taken cold,' he said ; 'I am burning, yet chilled ; my head aches. I think I will go and lie down ; and, Winnie, would you mind presently coming to bathe my brow with eau-de-Cologne and water ? You remember at Florence nothing did me so much good as that.'

'I will come in a few minutes, Reggie. I hope you are not suffering much.'

'I daresay I shall be all right to-morrow,' he returned, as he left the room.

As the door shut Winifrid changed her seat, and laid her hand upon her cousin's.

'What can this wonderful change mean, dearest Laura ?'

'It only means that Reginald has taken time to reflect, and his better self has conquered. Go to him, Winnie, and soothe him as much as you can. I think he is suffering.'

Laura went slowly into the *salon*, and sat down by the fire. Presently the waiter came in with the letters just arrived by the evening post.

Several for Reginald ; one for Winnie, with a French stamp ; and one addressed in Mrs. Crewe's writing to herself, containing an excellent report of the Admiral, and some small details touching Toppy and Collins, which brought the quiet cosy home in Leamington Road vividly before Laura ; and she sat lost in thought, contrasting the moral cyclone which had suddenly wrapped her in its wild eddies with the simple tranquillity of her past life and the serene future, to which she looked with such sweet certainty.

Here Winnie broke in upon her reflections.

'Reginald wants to know if there are any letters for him,' she said.

'There are several,' said Laura ; 'the post has been in some time.'

'I know most of these,' said Winnie, looking over them. 'There is one from his lawyer, and from Lord Dereham ; and this is a circular, and this is from the steward at Pierslynn.' She sighed as she said the name.

'Are you very fond of Pierslynn ?' asked Laura, looking at her with a strange yearning pity.

'No, not particularly. At first I thought I was going

to love the place ; but I suffered so much there—it is so associated with those first agonising doubts. But who can this be from ? it is a foreign-looking hand.'

She opened the letter addressed to herself, and looked at the contents, her countenance changing as she did so.

'This is very extraordinary,' she said. 'Listen to this, Laura :

"MADAM,

"I think it right to inform you that your husband prefers to remain in Paris because he is in the toils of a fascinating woman, well known in certain circles both here and in London, who resides not far from you ; she intends to take him with her on a distant journey. I warn you that once away from such influence as home still exercises over him, the lady in question, and the staff of bloodsuckers connected with her by various ties, will never leave their hold till they have reduced your husband, and through him yourself, to beggary. Madame —— has but one object—to get and to spend money ; and, as she cannot work altogether without help, she is obliged to share with the infernal crew to whom she is linked. You have hitherto resisted bravely the attempts made to draw you into the net. Make a strong effort now to rescue your infatuated husband, who is every day getting more and more involved in the meshes of a woman who never yet cared to have a poor lover. Do not quit Paris without him. All is arranged for the departure of Madame —— and her victim on the 2d, and once gone he will never return to you."

The cousins looked at each other in silence for a moment. Winnie was the first to speak.

'In one sense it is a false alarm,' she said. 'For some reason or other Reginald is determined to come with us on Thursday. Whether the Princess has made any new arrangement, I cannot tell.'

'Then you will take no notice of this? Anonymous productions seldom deserve any.'

'I do not know,' returned Winifrid thoughtfully ; 'I believe every word in this letter is true as far as that

dreadful woman is concerned—not that Reggie deliberately intended to leave me for ever; and, you see, he is really true at heart—at least, I begin to hope so. I wish he could see the letter; it might be a warning. I think I will show it to him, and say, “I know it is false, because you are not going to leave me.”’

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE few days which intervened before Mr. and Mrs. Piers and suite left Paris for England were evidently busy ones to Reginald. He did not, as formerly, absent himself for the whole day and often much of the night; but he wrote a good deal in his own room, and went to and fro, as if greatly occupied. Laura had easily found a moment when she could give him the memoranda she had prepared.

‘Read this carefully, Reginald,’ she said. ‘When in London we can discuss the subject thoroughly.’

Reginald merely replied, ‘We will do so,’ and thrust the packet into an inner pocket.

These days were some of the most painful Laura had ever spent. To observe how Reginald shrank from meeting her eyes, to see his pale downcast look, the indescribable beaten aspect, which his wife attributed to indisposition—all this was infinitely distressing. It seemed to her as though she was herself bowed down by the shame she had been obliged to bring upon the friend of her early youth.

The first time that Winifrid was quite alone with her and safe, which was the day following the receipt of the anonymous letter, as they were driving in the Bois, she said :

‘I gave the letter to Reginald last night, Laura. He was so restless I did not think it could make him worse; he was lying on the sofa, for he did not go to bed. I did not make the least scene. He read it, but was not so angry or upset as I expected. He seemed as if occupied about something else. He read it twice through, and examined it and the envelope carefully. “It is very extraor-

dinary," he said. "Who can have written it? She has many enemies, but this is too much; the misrepresentation is ingenious." Then, after a pause, with a sort of effort he went on: "You were right, Winnie, to show it to me; you will leave it in my hands?" "I never wish to see it again," said I. "You have yielded to my wish, and I am ready to trust you." Ah, Laura! that was not quite true, but I will try to make it true. He put out his hand and drew me down to him. "I believe you are a wise as well as a good woman, Winnie," said he; "let us try and make the best of each other. You have a generous heart. Would you—could you—still care for me if I were old and sickly—and—and poor, Winnie?" Oh, Laura! my heart yearned to him; and yet it burned, too, with anger, to think that for all the indifference he had shown even in my cruel sorrow, all the agony he must know he had inflicted on me, he never said, "Forgive me; let me atone to you;" but I knew that my—our—only chance was in at least *seeming* strong. So I replied, "When you are old, Reggie, I shall be old too; and for the rest, you know me, and you need no answer." "Yes, I think I do know you." He kissed me kindly, but still as if his mind were full of something else. "Go away to rest," he went on; "I fear you have had but little sleep of late. I will send for you if I feel worse; but I am not ill, Winnie—only uneasy." "Reggie," I said, "let me help you, if you need help, for I do love you still." He pressed me to him for an instant, and said in a low voice, "Good-night—God bless you." Have I done well, Laura? Do you think I have done wisely?

"It seems to me you have done nobly; and if Reginald is not more yours than he ever was before, he is unworthy of you," returned Laura with warmth.

Winnie sighed.

"It may all come right," she said. "But I shall never feel quite the same again, though he is still very dear to me."

It was a dry crisp evening when they reached London. Though Winifrid begged Laura to stay with her still, the latter decided to go straight to Mrs. Crewe's. She thought

it better for husband and wife to be alone together ; and she felt sure her absence would be an infinite relief to Reginald.

Mrs. Crewe's house never seemed so delightful as on her escape from the false position which her relations with Reginald compelled her to assume. The transparent honesty, the natural kindness of tone which pervaded the small establishment, produced something the same effect as breathing mountain air after being imprisoned in a back alley of a great town. Everything and every one was *en fête* to receive her. The door was thrown open by Collins, and displayed Mrs. Crewe standing under the lamp with Toppy under one arm, and behind her the Admiral.

'My darling girl, how late you are ! I began to fear there was an accident or something. How tired you look ! I am sure we are delighted to have you back. Here is the Admiral, quite wearying for you, and this dear cat wandered about looking for you for two or three days.'

This speech was broken by sundry hugs ; and then Laura was passed on to the gentler and more subdued greeting of her guardian.

'Come in, my dear,' continued Mrs. Crewe ; 'you evidently need refreshment. How is the poor young mother ? Collins ! make haste with Miss Piers's chop and the buttered toast. I would not let her put it down till you came, dear ; but the fire is clear, and it will be ready in ten or fifteen minutes.'

'Oh, how nice it is to be with you again !' said Laura, the tears springing to her eyes as she looked back at the agitating scenes through which she had passed.

'I am sure, dear, it must all have been very trying,' returned Mrs. Crewe. 'But Winifrid is young, she will soon recover ; and no doubt you had every comfort and elegance about you. Still, I flatter myself your heart is in our humble home.'

'It is, indeed,' said Laura, with a smile and a blush. 'Tell me, dear Admiral,' taking his hand again in hers, 'have you been quite well since I left ?'

She looked at him earnestly, for his face seemed pale and worn.

'Not quite so robust as usual, but I am nearly myself again, thanks to Mrs. Crewe's care.'

'He was very seriously ill,' cried Mrs. Crewe; 'bronchitis, and I do not know what. I wanted to send for you, but he would not hear of it. Come away and take off your things.'

When they had reached the privacy of Laura's room, Mrs. Crewe was in her element.

'You see, my dear girl, I have taken advantage of your absence to make a few improvements. I hope you like your new curtains. You see they are real curtains. You can draw them across; the old ones were a mere bit of drapery. I had a woman in the house to make them, and a machine. I am going to buy the machine, paying for it by weekly instalments; isn't that a convenience? I have calculated that I can pay for it in twenty-six weeks.'

'Indeed, Mrs. Crewe?'

'Wait a bit, my dear. Look here; I have bought you another chest of drawers, polished deal, you see, and bevelled edges; got it such a bargain—not that I would mind what I spent on you; you are my own dear daughter, though you are not my son's wife yet.'

The following day Mrs. Crewe proposed to pay a visit of condolence to Winifrid.

The preparations for this ceremony were considerable, and in proportion to what Mrs. Crewe thought was due to the rank and fashion of the person to be visited. Laura therefore excused herself for preceding her good hostess, as she had promised to be with her cousin early. The Dowager Mrs. Piers, too, was expected that evening on her return from the Grange, where she had been staying with her daughter.

Laura was anxious to see how Winnie had borne the fatigue of their hasty journey, but still more so for some communication with Reginald as to their future plan of action. It was now four days since she had given him her ultimatum. How earnestly she hoped he would be honest and straightforward with her, for she knew that his whole future depended on the secret of his weak dishonesty being preserved.

Winnie had not yet risen when Laura reached the hotel. She had been greatly fatigued, her maid said, and Mr. Piers had persuaded her to rest. Laura was admitted immediately.

The curtains were partly drawn to exclude the light; but one ray of sunshine fell upon the pillow and lit up the face which lay upon it, and Laura was struck by the subtle change that had come to the well-known countenance.

It had a pale loveliness, a grave composure, a steadfast look which detracted from its youthfulness, while it added beauty.

'How good of you to come so early!' said Winnie, holding out her hand. 'I hardly hoped to see you so soon. Am I not lazy to be here? But Reginald begged me to rest, and I did not like to contradict him. How did you find every one?'

For a while Winnie listened with some interest to Laura's details; then her attention wandered. Laura paused, and there was a short silence, which Winnie broke, speaking in a low, dreamy tone, as if to herself:

'I seem to miss my poor little boy more than ever here. I was so happy, so full of brightest hope, when we left London not five months ago, and now all is so changed—myself most of all; I seem to have no occupation, no hope. I thought, just now, why should I get up? I have nothing to do—no duty to perform.'

'It is natural you should think so at present; but you will find new interests and occupations, dearest Winnie, later on.'

'I hope so—I do hope so.' Another short pause. 'Do you know, Laura,' she resumed, "I feel strangely uneasy about Reginald. He looks so ghastly white, and has such a curious, fixed, almost despairing expression; something must have occurred in Paris of which we know nothing, which made him change his plans. I wish I could find out, that I might help him or comfort him. I feel uneasy if he is out of my sight, and he is very little in it. But he is kind—indifferently kind.'

A deep sigh interrupted her; then she went on.

'He had a letter from Madame Moseynska this morning

THE ADMIRAL'S WARD.

He was talking to me when the letters were brought up ; and, though he shuffled them all together, I caught a glimpse of her writing—I could not mistake it,—but I took no notice. I do not want to tease him when he seems so unhappy. So long as she is at a distance I do not fear.'

'I do not think there is much to fear,' said Laura thoughtfully, 'except that Reginald may have been losing heavily enough at cards to account for his gloom.'

'I am sure I should not mind that if he would stop now,' cried Winnie. 'I should not mind being poor if we could only be all and all to each other as we were once—ah, for how short a time !'

'I do not think Reginald would like poverty,' said Laura ; 'I hope you never will be poor. But Winnie, if you do not intend to receive Mrs. Crewe in your room,

'Oh yes, certainly ; and then I will drive back with her. Poor, dear Mrs. Crewe ! How I should like to ask her down to Pierslynn ; but I do not think she is a favourite with Reginald,—and do you remember how savage he used to be to Denzil Crewe ? That was because Denzil admired me. I always liked Denzil ; he is so good and firm. Perhaps it would have been better for every one if I had married him.'

'I do not think so,' said Laura softly, with a smile that Winnie thought was peculiar.

'Well, then, dear, go into the sitting-room, and I will dress. Perhaps Reggie will come in. He went to the bank, I know, this morning, and I think he will come in to luncheon.'

Laura obeyed, and, taking up the *Times*, looked vaguely through the shipping intelligence. But her own thoughts were more interesting. Winnie's unconsciousness of coming reverses touched her deeply. Perhaps the fire of trial might draw her and her husband nearer ; perhaps detection did not feel very hopeful. There was something callous, something disappointing, in the way he had taken the terrible tidings of her discovery and intentions. While she pondered these things the door opened and the object of her

thoughts walked in. His appearance warranted his wife's uneasiness, but he did not seem disturbed by Laura's presence.

'I returned in hopes of having a word with you,' he said, after a slight greeting. 'The less you and I put on paper to each other the better; but I want to arrange a meeting when we can talk long and uninterruptedly, and then I must get away the day after to-morrow to Pierslynn. I too have a proposition to make.'

'I will meet you where you wish,' said Laura.

'To-morrow,' he resumed, 'Winnie spends the day with my mother; meet me at the Charing Cross Hotel. I will have a private room, and we can talk as long as we like.'

'Very well,' replied Laura; 'Charing Cross at two?'

'Yes, at two. I need not make a note of our rendezvous,' he added, with a bitter smile; 'it is not likely to slip my memory.'

'Do you dine here to-day?' asked Laura.

'I am not sure; I think not. Why? can't you stay with Winnie?'

'I was going to say that if we can persuade her to dine with us it would be a great pleasure, and perhaps be a useful change for her.'

'I daresay it will; try and persuade her. Poor girl! it was an evil hour for her when she fell in with me!'

'Do not say so. You may make her happy—be happy yourself yet. Do not lose heart, Reginald.'

He made a slight despairing gesture, and, after a moment's silence, said:

'Be sure you bring those letters with you, Laura. I only want to read them,' he added hastily.

'You may take them with you to read,' said Laura, colouring with pity for the self-abasement that suggested the assurance. 'You cannot think I would guard against you as against an enemy?'

'You had better,' he said hastily. 'I cannot answer for myself.'

Further speech was prevented by the entrance of Mrs. Crewe, smiling, serene, and conscious of being well dressed.

Reginald summoned sufficient self-control to greet her cheerfully, and she greatly enjoyed the ensuing hour of

condolence, sympathy, and cross-examination. Finally she was made quite happy by Winnie's ready acceptance of her invitation to dinner, and carried her off to spend a tranquil afternoon.

The following morning Laura sallied forth, feeling as we may suppose men feel who volunteer for a 'forlorn hope' or any other desperate undertaking; yet on her way to Charing Cross she nerved herself to pay a visit to her first patron, from whom a fresh commission awaited her.

Reginald was loitering at the bookstall when she entered the crowded station. When he turned at her greeting he looked curiously at her for a moment; then led the way into the hotel and asked for a private room.

'Bring me pen and ink, and some brandy and soda,' he said to the waiter. 'Will you not take something to eat, Laura?' he continued.

'I am too anxious and distressed to eat.'

'You are wonderfully changed,' said Reginald, leaning on the back of a chair and looking at her with calm scrutiny. 'It struck me with new force when I met you just now; there is a quiet and composed manner about you quite different from your old shy coldness. Ah! there is no use in looking back. Have you brought the letters and other documents? Let us get to the bottom of this infernal business as soon as we can.'

'They are all here,' returned Laura, drawing out the packet. 'First, here is Holden's letter, and the few lines which accompanied it and announced his death. The note mentioned as enclosed I gave up when I got the packet described; the rest are the papers it contained.'

Holden's letter finished, Reginald laid it down silently, and, shading his eyes for a moment with his hand, took up the next paper presented to him, the short explanation appended to the documents deposited at Winter's; and so read on through the whole, paleness spreading over his face, but retaining a degree of hard composure.

'The evidence is very complete,' he said, somewhat huskily. 'How did you get possession of these papers?'

'I went alone to this Mr. Winter, and he gave them to me on payment of a fee.'

'Then he made no difficulty about giving them up?'

'Not the least.'

'Which proves that Holden kept council; otherwise a kindred spirit of such a fellow would have been making terms with me before Holden was half-way to Australia. I begin to hope the secret is between us alone; that is the best in a bad business.'

'And with me you are safe,' said Laura, in a low tone.

'I believe it,' returned Reginald, and walked once to and fro in silence. 'Laura,' he then broke out hurriedly, in a changed voice, 'I know how I must seem in your eyes! I can never right myself with *you*; but I want to say—I *must* say—how impossible it is for *you*, a calm-natured, untried woman, to know the bitterness of having *such* fortune within my grasp and seeing it wrenched away! That beggar Holden always hated me—I don't know why; I scarcely felt his existence; but if I hadn't been such an infernal idiot as to leave the Pierslynn pedigree with West to show him the day my wonderful luck first dawned on me, he would never have dreamed of any connection between me and the Geoffrey Piers whose history was known to his aunt. When the facts stared me in the face, I felt I could *not* give up Pierslynn. No one knew it, but ever since my boyhood I had dreamed of inheriting the family estate. I had silently watched for Hugh Piers's marriage, and every year that saw him still unwedded swelled my hopes. I had the character of being light-hearted and easy-going. I am *not*! I am proud and luxurious and passionate, and I hated my life. When I found that Captain Edward Piers, *your* father, was legitimate, I resolved to secure myself by marrying you, as I told Holden I would. I did not want to rob you quite; I liked you well enough—better, in fact, than any girl I knew, for I had never been what is called in love—I mean, real wild sort of love; and although I should have preferred social rank, I was not at all averse to a home with you; and you loved me, Laura—you always loved me! Why were you so obstinate in delaying our marriage? All might have been well. Once your husband, I should have got over my frantic passion for Winnie; you would have been wise and good. You

would have been my prime counsellor and best friend. *'Why did you not marry me, Laura ?'*

'Because I suppose you were to be saved from the crime of breaking my heart and Winnie's,' said Laura severely. 'I do not think you are aware what depths of selfishness you are displaying !'

'Am I ?' he returned indifferently. 'Well, I shall say no more about myself. But, by heaven, I did not intend to rob you ! However, it is useless to try back ; let us see what conclusion we can come to.'

He sat down at the table, and drawing out the paper Laura had given him before leaving Paris, unfolded it, and seemed to read the lines for a minute or two in silence.

'Your plan is ingenious,' he said at last, 'and generous. You propose to place all these papers in my hand, and to let me account for their possession as best I can, leaving it to me to announce the discovery of your rights, and so pass before the world as a just and honourable man.' He smiled bitterly. 'I should certainly come clean out of the affair. But, Laura, you are not an ambitious woman ! You are not avaricious. Could we not hush up the business in some other way ? You love my wife, and would not like to push her from her place. Can you not leave me—us—Pierslynn for my life ? I would agree to give you a handsome income, and should you ever marry and have children, I would secure the succession of the estate to them. Wealth and station *cannot* have the value for *you* they have for *me* ! Laura ! for our old friendship's sake, do not be too hard upon me !'

Reginald stretched out his hand suddenly, and grasped hers hard as he ceased to speak.

She felt a strange mixture of compassion and contempt. That he should degrade himself by such a speech seemed incredible ; was all the wealth of England worth such abasement ?

'I am not hard on you, Reginald,' she said sadly, as she withdrew her hand. 'I wish to spare you, but I *will* have my rights ! You have not thought of what you suggest ! Suppose God gives you other children ? How cruel it would be to bring them up in expectation of an

inheritance that could never be theirs ! and how could I account for receiving an income from you, on whom I have no claim ?'

Reginald sprang from his seat and walked to and fro restlessly.

' But, Laura,' he exclaimed, resuming his chair again, ' if these cursed lawyers get their fingers into the caldron, they will stir up all kinds of mischief ! They will tell you you can claim all the money I have spent since I held the estate ; they will want to know what I have done with it ; and, Laura, I must *not* have that question raised !'

' Can you not trust me, Reginald ? Do you think I would really injure you ? Do you think I would ask for any of the money I fear you have squandered ? Be a man, Reginald ! put the past away from you—lay hold of the future. You have that in you to win a place yet, as good as what you lose now ; but I am resolved to prove my father's legitimacy, my own claims, and—you are in my hands.'

She spoke low, but with indescribable force and distinctness, with a flash of spirit, of unconscious command, that startled her cousin as a revelation.

He rested his elbows on the table, and covered his face with his hands. When he looked up, there was a sullen, beaten look in his face, that made Laura's heart ache.

' As you will,' he said, in a low tone, and paused again. ' Now, to settle how we shall carry out this tragic-comedy. I shall take these letters, and say I found them among old papers belonging to John Piers, the late man's father. It so happens there are several letters from Geoffrey Piers, your grandfather, respecting his son. One tells of his removal from Llanogwen to a school near London ; another describes his having had a severe attack of fever ; and the third, in 1831, when he must have been ten or eleven, entreats the friendly protection of the head of the family for his poor solitary boy, who would soon be an orphan, as he feels his end approaching. By putting all together in the same old yellow envelope, no one will suspect that all were not originally wrapped up together.'

'That will do,' said Laura. 'What will your next step be ?'

'I suppose the correct thing will be to go to my solicitors ; they will probably communicate with you and propose a compromise ; but I think it will be well to inform you myself ; this is for further consideration.'

He paused ; and Laura, not knowing very well what to say, employed herself in folding up her grandmother's letters and the memoir of Deborah Pryce, which she handed to Reginald, carefully returning Holden's to her pocket.

'You have still evidence enough there to send me to penal servitude,' said Reginald bitterly. 'Look here, Laura ; can you wait a month for the assertion of your rights ? because I want to get Christmas over. My mother wishes us to stay with her ; and—and—my poor mother ! to come back to the narrow life she thought she had escaped for ever !'

Again he covered his face.

'Reginald !' cried Laura, 'she shall suffer no pecuniary loss, I promise that ; as to the rest, take your own time. One point more : for God's sake let no cloud come between you and your wife—she loves you so much. Cast away every thought that can draw you from her. Is she not tender and good, bright, companionable ?'

'She *is* ! She is lovely and lovable, pure, true ; but, Laura, you do not know the magic there is about a clever, unscrupulous, subtle woman, who fears nothing, and knows everything, and is always ready to put that knowledge to account to amuse, to pique, or soothe the man who interests her, either as a tyrant or victim. With the help of such a witch as that, not even *you*, Laura, would have wrenched Pierslynn from me. No *good* woman ever fascinates as such a syren does, at least a man of my nature !'

'Ah ! is there, then, no place in your heart for Winnie, whom you sought so eagerly and——'

Laura burst into tears.

Reginald looked at her surprised.

'This is a curious situation,' he said coldly ; 'my old love entreating me to love the woman who supplanted her.'

Laura, who was overstrained and exhausted, still sobbed.

'Don't!' exclaimed Reginald at last; 'I cannot stand tears, and I *do* love Winnie! I was always happy with her when we were alone together. I love her a deuced deal more than half the married men in England love their wives! Now, we have not much more to say; only, before we part, tell me to whom *you* are engaged.'

'Engaged!' repeated Laura, astonished; 'what induces you to think I am engaged?'

'Your regard for your rights! If you had not some other interest beyond your own to care for you would not have held out so stoutly.'

'You are mistaken,' returned Laura, startled into composure, while her cheek glowed, and the tears still hung on her eyelashes. 'Under *any* circumstances, I should have stood upon my rights—as a mere act of justice. I could not be party to a fraud.'

Reginald looked intently at her as she spoke, and in his turn flushed, but grew pale quickly. In spite of Laura's effort to be steady, her eyes sank under his.

'You have not really answered my question. Laura, tell me who it is you are going to marry. I am convinced you are engaged. There are, to my mind, a thousand indefinable indications in your countenance, your bearing; *who* is the man, Laura?'

'If I am engaged, Reginald, it cannot concern you.'

'It does!' he exclaimed fiercely. 'The secret of my life will soon be at the mercy of a stranger.'

'It will not, I solemnly promise, Reginald; not even to a husband, if I ever have one, will I betray you.'

Reginald paced the room rapidly, an expression of despair and rage in his face.

'I know what such promises are worth,' he growled between his teeth; then suddenly stopping opposite to her he exclaimed, 'By heaven, Laura, you are going to marry that sailor fellow Crewe!'

'Why do you think so?' she asked.

'I cannot tell, but I know it. God! to be at *his* mercy! Probably he already knows his *fiancée* is a wealthy heiress.'

'Yes,' said Laura, gathering courage, 'I have promised Denzil Crewe to be his wife; but he has chosen me as I

was—plain, insignificant, poor. He has not the faintest idea of what I know; and, believe me, he never^{shall}. Your reputation is as dear to me as though you were my brother. Trust me, Reginald; you must trust me!

'I have no choice,' he said gloomily. 'But of what value is life to me now? Would it not be wiser to end this wretched tangle? Laura, you have been my ruin! Had you married me at once, all would have gone well. What is life to me?'

'Much,' said Laura, somewhat alarmed, but venturing to catch his arm. 'The future may be yours if you will. Your life belongs to Winnie. Banish the past from your mind. Not a suspicion need attach to you. Reginald, you will atone to me for *everything* if you will take up the broken thread of your career, and make a place for yourself, as you can if you choose.'

Reginald flung away from her and threw himself into a chair. A few minutes' silence ensued. Then rising, he said in an altered voice:

'Come, there is no more to be done. You give me till the new year to make my arrangements. Winifrid remains with my mother; I shall come to and fro, and will find an opportunity to get those letters from you at the last moment. It is better you should keep them now.'

He rang vehemently for the waiter, and continued:

'You had better leave without me; and, Laura, I am not ungrateful. You have been generous: we can never be enemies, but I would never willingly meet you again. Give me your hand, and—remember, I was sorely tempted.'

'Good-bye, Reginald. Do not despair—and—keep your heart warm with love for your best friend—your wife.'

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE weeks which ensued would have been very pleasant to Laura but for the *dénouement* hanging over her. She saw Winnie frequently, and Reginald scarcely at all. But she was gratified by observing that the former seemed

more tranquil and content, and appeared to be on more friendly terms with her mother-in-law than formerly.

Winnie was a frequent visitor in Leamington Road, and was ere long entirely restored to the Admiral's and Mrs. Crewe's favour. Reginald revolved between Piers-lynn and London, and no hint of the Polish Princess disturbed the smooth surface of their lives.

Meanwhile letters from Denzil cheered his mother and his *fiancée*. It was Laura's first love-letter, and, although a rational production, its tone of deep tenderness, the details of his daily life poured out with the confidence affection alone can create, made her heart swell with pride and joy.

He was but a few days arrived when he wrote ; yet he had already time to gather that although matters were in a bad state, they were less complicated than he expected. He therefore hoped to finish his work in about six months, as his longing to return to the home he knew awaited him grew more intense the farther he went from it.

This letter made Laura burn to tell him all the events of the past few weeks, but she resolutely resisted the wish. She would never betray Reginald to a man who had always, in her opinion, undervalued him ; as Winnie's husband too, he was, if possible, to be lifted over the chasm which had suddenly opened under his feet.

One cold rainy afternoon in the first week of the new year, Laura, on returning from her morning's walk, was greeted by Mrs. Crewe with the news that 'Mr. Piers was closeted with the Admiral ; and mark my words, Laura, something extraordinary has happened ! That poor young man had quite a scared look.'

'Indeed !' said Laura. 'I will take off my hat, dear Mrs. Crewe, and join you immediately.'

Was *the* moment come ? and if so, how would it all turn out ? A strange sense of suffocation oppressed her—her heart beat—she did not know how to endure herself ; she dreaded to go downstairs, yet she could not stay in the silence of her own chamber. She left it, and was overtaken at the foot of the stairs by the Admiral and Reginald, both looking grave and disturbed.

The latter shook hands with her silently, and, turning to the Admiral, said :

'I leave it to you, my dear sir, to communicate this matter to Laura, and I leave myself in your hands without fear.'

'You can with every confidence ; and may the good God guide us for the best,' returned the Admiral solemnly.

'The matter will soon be public—there is no need for secrecy,' rejoined Reginald : and, shaking hands with the Admiral, he hastily left the house.

The Admiral looked after him for a moment ; then, taking Laura's hand, said impressively :

'I have a strange tale to tell you, my dear ; come into the dining-room. Our good friend Mrs. Crewe has a right to hear it also.'

Laura, trembling in every limb, followed her guardian, and Mrs. Crewe, who had caught the words, 'strange tale,' was metaphorically standing on the tiptoe of expectation.

'Do sit down, my dear sir, and tell us all about it. You know, if any one is safe, *I am*.'

The Admiral did not heed her ; he stood by the fire holding Laura's hand in both his own.

'My dear child, it has pleased God to send you a great, a totally unforeseen change of fortune. Your cousin Reginald has just now told me that in looking through his predecessor's papers, a task he had too long postponed, he came upon a packet labelled "Geoffrey Piers's letters," within which was a second parcel carefully sealed. On examination it proved to contain the certificate of your grandfather's marriage, some letters describing that event, written by your grandmother, and some other letters and papers, which prove, Reginald says, beyond a doubt that you are the real heir of the Pierslynn estate, as you descend from the elder brother of Reginald's grandfather. This, of course, if all turns out as he anticipates, will bring a terrible reverse upon your relatives ; but Reginald, with the decision of an honest man, lost no time in laying the documents before his solicitors, who yesterday examined the register of the church where the marriage is stated to have taken place, and there they found an entry corresponding to the certificate. Your father is proved legiti-

mate. It requires but a few formalities, therefore, to establish your claim.'

He stopped; and Laura, trembling visibly, could hardly utter the words:

'This seems incredible. I feel terrified at so extraordinary a reverse.'

But Mrs. Crewe could not restrain her excitement.

'Laura the owner of Pierslynn! Laura the real head of the family! The ways of Providence are past finding out! Why, my dear Admiral, no romance in Mudie's library can equal this! And will the house and grounds, the carriages and the horses, the—the pictures and the family jewels, all belong to Laura? I do not seem able to believe it!'

'I can hardly believe it myself,' said the Admiral, still holding Laura's hand and looking with some anxiety into her agitated face. 'I am by no means sure how we ought to feel in these strange circumstances. It is a sore trial to Laura, it is a terrible blow to Reginald Piers. Let us keep our minds calm and anticipate as little as possible. Messrs. Greenwood, Mr. Piers's solicitors, have sent down an agent to the village in Wales where your father was born, to ascertain if his birth is registered there. Meantime, the deepest source of regret and anxiety to Mr. Piers is that he has spent so much of *your* money, as he calls it. Not only three years' income, but a large amount of his predecessor's savings.'

'I am sure, if this strange story proves true, he need not distress himself about what he has spent. I will never trouble him,' cried Laura.

'So I ventured to assure him,' said the Admiral gravely, as he drew forward a chair for her. 'Such unconscious appropriation carries with it neither guilt nor blame.'

'I suppose not,' said Mrs. Crewe, returning to the fireplace and gazing with a profound air at the comfortable blaze; 'but, though I say it myself, I can see a little more below the surface than many, and it seems to me very extraordinary: first Mr. Piers's tremendous haste to marry our dear Laura here, then the breaking of the engagement, then this discovery. You see, if he *had* married you,

Laura, he would have still been master of Pierslynn, whatever happened.'

'Oh, Mrs. Crewe!' interrupted Laura, in a tone of genuine horror, for the suggestion terrified her.

'My dear Mrs. Crewe,' said the Admiral, with some severity, 'you should not permit yourself even to think so uncharitably. It was entirely in this man's power to suppress and destroy the evidence which robs him of his fortune. When he discovered these documents he was alone with his own conscience, visible only to the All Seeing, of whose presence I fear he is but little mindful. Had he burned these papers he would never have been found out, as no suspicion seems to have existed that Geoffrey Piers ever married the girl who was Laura's grandmother; in short, even to a man of principle there was a certain degree of temptation in such a moment. Reginald has surmounted it.'

'My dear sir,' returned that lady, unabashed, 'not being as good and holy as you are, or as high-minded as our dear Laura, though I should scorn a mean action, I am perhaps a better judge of worldly matters than either of you. However, be my opinions what they may, I shall keep them to myself.'

'To your opinions, dear Mrs. Crewe, you have every right, only pray be careful in forming them;' then, turning to Laura, the Admiral continued: 'Your cousin recommends that you should put yourself in the hands of Messrs. Thurston and Trent, as it is right they should prosecute inquiries and see that everything is properly and legally carried out. I therefore propose to accompany you to their office to-morrow morning. Till then let us try and divert our thoughts somewhat, for I cannot yet quite believe that Reginald's rights can be upset. If any doubt remains, he says he will defend them.'

'He ought,' said Laura thoughtfully. 'Are there not sometimes amicable suits where both parties are simply anxious to ascertain the truth.'

'I suppose there must be,' returned the Admiral.

'I will go to my own room,' said Laura. 'I feel as if I must be alone; I am overpowered by the strangeness of my position!'

'God bless and guide you, my dear Laura,' said the Admiral, laying his hand on her head as she passed him.

'Would you take a glass of wine, and then lie down and try to sleep?' asked Mrs. Crewe anxiously, as if she had met with an accident.

'I want nothing but a little quiet thought,' returned Laura; and then with a sudden impulse she threw her arms round the kind woman's neck and kissed her affectionately, as she left the room.

The rest of the day was curiously constrained and oppressive. The Admiral having advised avoidance of the subject uppermost in their thoughts, conversation proceeded intermittently, and the hours seemed to Laura preternaturally long. Moreover, the sense of playing a part weakened her courage. She was especially desirous that all things should seem so clear and natural that Denzil's suspicions might not be roused.

'My dear,' said Mrs. Crewe, as they went upstairs at night, 'do let me come in and talk to you.'

'Yes, certainly, come in,' returned Laura, opening the door and lighting the candles on the dressing-table.

'To think of it all is too astonishing,' continued Mrs. Crewe, sitting down on an ottoman, which was really a bonnet-box.

Laura took a low cane chair and resigned herself to listen, while Mrs. Crewe proceeded to remove her lace cravat and fold it up with mechanical unconscious care as she spoke.

'To think of you, who were, in a manner of speaking, pooh-poohed and snubbed and made little of, being head over them all! That poor conceited Mrs. Piers, the Dowager, as she liked to be called, as if she were a duchess! I really *am* sorry for her. Won't she be ready to cut her tongue out for having refused to receive *you* for a daughter-in-law! Well; it's not every heiress that knows she was chosen for herself alone, as you know my dear blessed boy chose you; and when I say, Laura, you deserve him,' added the mother, with a little sob, 'I give you the highest praise you will ever get.'

'I think you do,' said Laura, drawing nearer, and taking Mrs. Crewe's hand.

'Never forget that he chose you out of pure disinterested love,' continued Mrs. Crewe emphatically, 'and he does love you, my dear, with all his heart! I saw that before you did. I wish he were here to advise and support you in the present extraordinary crisis. What do you think, my love? shall he have to take your name?'

'I know as little as yourself, Mrs. Crewe. I should much prefer to take his.'

'And you are right, Laura,' she returned with grave emphasis as she unpinned her cap and set it on her knee, where it produced an uncanny effect, as if she were holding a supplementary head. 'The Crewes are a good old family, though not in the peerage, and a truer gentleman than my dear boy never came of any stock, though adverse circumstances compelled him to enter the Mercantile Marine. Well, well, good luck comes to him at last! He gets a dear, good wife and a fortune into the bargain; for I feel sure, my love, nothing will make you break a promise once given!'

'I hope not,' said Laura, with a faint smile, for she saw the drift of her kind friend's conversation. 'Nothing save Denzil's own wish would induce me to break with him.'

'And there is small danger of that!' cried Mrs. Crewe, kissing her with warmth. 'But, my dear, what will Mrs. Reginald Piers say? It will be an awful trial to her. I hope and trust she will keep friends with *you*, and not run away with the idea that you ought not to assert your rights, and all that sort of thing.'

'I do not fear it,' replied Laura thoughtfully. 'She has too much sense,' but even while she spoke a dim fear arose in her heart and chilled it.

'I am not so sure,' said Mrs. Crewe. 'We are seldom just or reasonable about those we love as she loves her husband. Depend upon it she will be awfully cut up at the idea of his loss and mortification, for though he carried it off with frank carelessness, he was tremendously proud of Pierslynn and his position. I changed *my* opinion of Reginald Piers a good deal lately, and, in spite of what the

Admiral says, I think the whole affair very strange—very strange indeed.'

'It does not seem so to me,' said Laura—'at least in the sense you mean. But it is impossible that Winifrid and I should fail to understand each other; and, after all, our speculations may be quite fruitless; let us not dwell upon them.'

'That is not at all likely. I consider your claim indisputable. I wonder if Mr. Piers has got through much of the savings. I believe there was a considerable sum in hand. Do you think, dear, you will have a town as well as a country house?'

'Oh, Mrs. Crewe!' said Laura, laughing in spite of the anxiety which oppressed her. 'Such a question never occurred to me. Indeed, I feel too much for Reginald and Winnie to think how the change will affect myself.'

'Very praiseworthy indeed, my dear. But—listen; there's Toppy crying to be let in. It is a wet night. What an intelligent creature she is, to be sure! I'm coming, my precious puss, I'm coming. Good-night, dearest Laura. I have kept you too long out of your bed.'

The interview with Messrs Thurston and Trent was a severe trial to Laura.

The surprise of both gentlemen was very great; indeed, it was several minutes before even Mr. Trent's keen faculties could assimilate the facts reported.

'These succession cases are often very extraordinary, and few can surpass the present one if matters turn out as you seem to think they will,' he said.

'Very remarkable—very, indeed,' observed Mr. Thurston, playing with his eye-glass; 'awkward discovery for a man to make; yet, after all, perhaps less mortifying than to have it made by another. At any rate, it puts Mr. Piers's reputation beyond a shadow of doubt.'

'Yes,' returned Mr. Trent, tapping the table thoughtfully with a paper-knife; 'he acted as any honourable man would. Of course, I am glad enough of your good fortune'—to Laura—'but, at the same time, I feel sincerely for Reginald Piers; it is a tremendous blow.'

'You must direct me how best to soften it to him,'

said Laura, in a low voice, feeling strangely guilty, and perceiving clearly enough that, with the usual masculine *esprit de corps*, the partners thought it a deplorable freak of fortune that a fine estate should pass from the hands of a capable man to those of a woman, and a plain, quiet, unremarkable woman to boot.

'Of course we shall be happy to manage the case for Miss Piers. Admiral, the sooner so important a matter is settled the better. I will call on Greenwood this afternoon, and ask to see the papers. There is no use in making any plans or suggestions till we ascertain how you really stand, Miss Piers. It is really a curious affair, very curious. I shall let you know the result of our conference to-morrow morning.'

'This will be a startling piece of news for my wife,' said Mr. Trent, as he escorted the Admiral and Laura downstairs. 'She is in Dresden with our youngest boy and girl, as you know, for the winter. She was asking about you in her last letter. They do not return till April.'

'My best regards to her,' said Laura. 'I shall be glad to see her again.'

'Well, I confess I am profoundly sorry at this discovery,' said Trent to Thurston. 'Just as Piers was preparing to stand for —— and settle down into an active country gentleman.'

'He has not been very steady to the country as yet,' replied the other drily. 'He was always running abroad and hither and thither.'

'What an unlucky slip it was for him to have let his engagement with this girl fall through! Of course, we thought him a fool then, and I must say, as far as beauty goes, he has changed for the better.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Thurston, 'perhaps; but I find Miss Piers a very interesting young woman.'

'She will be extremely interesting to many now,' replied Mr. Trent. 'I doubt if this fortune will be a real gain to her; some sharper will marry her for her money.'

'We must hope for better things,' rejoined his partner, as Mr. Trent closed his blotting-book and prepared to go out.

CHAPTER XLIX.

IT was still early when Laura reached home. She could not settle to any of her usual occupations. Her whole life was upset. The lines of her existence would need to be laid down afresh. One question she revolved anxiously in her own mind: should she write at once to Denzil, or wait to impart the great news until he returned home?

Her great longing to see him, to have the comfort and support of his presence and counsel, inclined her to write without delay, and on this she finally decided. But looking into her heart, she found, that first disturbed uneasy day, that the source of her discomfort was the fear of finding Winnie changed towards her, and misunderstanding her. She hesitated to go and see her, for she shrank from meeting old Mrs. Piers, as she did not know if her son had yet announced his unfortunate discovery.

The promised report from Mr. Trent did not reach his new client till the day after her visit to him, and then he merely said that the proofs of her claim seemed most satisfactory, but that he was sending down an agent to examine the baptismal registry in the church of Llanogwen. On the return of this *employé*, Mr. Trent would like to see her again.

The day following the receipt of this note, Laura was writing a long letter to Denzil in her own room. A tap on the door disturbed her. In reply to her invitation 'Come in,' the door opened to admit Winifrid.

She looked pale, and her large eyes had a distressed alarmed expression.

'Dearest Winnie, how rejoiced I am to see you!' cried Laura, holding out her arms to embrace her. 'I have wanted so much to come to you.'

'Ah, Laura!' said Winifrid, her lips quivering, 'what is all this that Reginald has been telling me?'

'What has he told you?' was Laura's counter-question, as she drew her cousin to a chair and placed herself beside her.

'Oh, I can hardly believe it!' cried Winifrid. 'That Pierslynn is yours; and all—all that we possess. That Reginald has been unconsciously keeping you out of your own; and now he must give up all to you. Laura, dear Laura, it is not that I would rob you or wrong you; but, oh! I feel it is hard, desperately hard, on Reginald. I am sure, if you had only yourself to think of, you might—But I do not know what I am saying; you see Reggie has nothing in the world he can call his own, yet he has been so luxurious in his ways, and I am of so little use to him. Oh, Laura! what can I do to help him?'

'Dearest Winnie, do not make yourself miserable. Do you think I could be happy, and know that you and Reginald wanted for anything? Let us take counsel together, dear, and settle what will be best for you. I cannot help asserting my own rights. It is inevitable. Reginald could not consent to retain Pierslynn at my pleasure. He can, he will make a place for himself. He will be in a better position than he has yet filled, and he will be more your own.'

'He has been all that I can wish in his hour of trial,' sobbed Winnie. 'So noble, so just to you; and all I ask is to be of use and comfort to him, but he is awfully cast down. Neither of us know how to break the terrible news to his poor mother.'

'Believe me, she shall not suffer,' said Laura. 'I have determined she shall lose nothing by her son's change of fortune; my first care shall be to secure independence to her and to you.'

'I am sure you will be kind and generous; but, Laura, it is very bitter to "give up," even to you!' and Winnie shed some irrepressible tears. 'For myself I do not care. Indeed, indeed, I do not. But to see *him* so pale and still and downcast is terrible. Yet I have had some moments of exquisite delight. Last night, when he told me all, he laid his head upon my shoulder and said, "But I have *you* left, and you will always be the same—tender and true." So you see he must love me best of all! Then, Laura, I may assure him that you will not forsake him?'

'No, my own dear cousin; I will be just, and it is only justice in me to take care of your future,' returned

Laura, observing how completely the idea of Reginald, his losses, his trouble and suffering, swallowed up every other; even she herself was utterly overlooked; only, thank God! there was no bitterness in Winnie's simple heart against her.

'I am sure, I was always sure, you are kind and just,' returned Winnie, with a little quivering sob.

'Winnie, dear,' said Laura, anxious to change her thoughts, 'try and find out what Reginald would like to do, and where he would like to live, and so soon as matters are settled, and I have some command of money, we must look out a nice home for you. I cannot be happy till I know you are comfortable.'

'You *are* good and kind, Laura! Oh, do help me to keep Reginald in London! He said something last night of hiding ourselves on the Continent, but I do not want that. Oh, Laura, how old Mrs. Piers will rage to think that she prevented Reginald's marriage with you!'

'I am sure no one else regrets it now,' returned Laura, with a smile.

'I feel more comforted,' said Winnie presently; 'I wish Reginald did not look so despondent. Shall I ask him to come and talk to you, Laura? I am sure you would do him good.'

'No, Winnie; situated as we both are, I think you had better leave him to himself. However, assure him from me that I am his true friend.'

After a short silence Laura, to divert her listener's mind, confided to her that she was engaged to Denzil Crewe, a piece of news which roused Winifrid's interest. She was greatly astonished, for her imagination always depicted Denzil as mourning the loss of herself. She was kindly and sympathetic, however, and full of all good wishes. But the dominant thought was of the strange freak by which Pierslynn and Laura would pass into Denzil's hands.

'And Mrs. Crewe! What a state of excitement she must be in! Oh, I cannot meet her to-day, Laura! I am not strong enough.'

'You need not, dear; she is out.'

'And I will go before she returns.'

'Let me know when you have broken the news to Mrs. Piers,' were Laura's last words as Winnie kissed her warmly and went quickly away.

The ensuing weeks were crowded with business visits and consultations at Messrs. Thurston and Trent's office, perusals of leases and examinations of accounts, discussions of plans and preparing of deeds. No obstacle presented itself to Laura's quietly taking possession of her property.

Meantime Parliament met, and the world of Mayfair had a few days' pleasant excitement over the Pierslynn romance. The society papers gave it a paragraph or two, and then a fresher topic drove it from the field.

Laura's provision for her disinherited kinsman satisfied the lawyers on both sides; and Reginald, as he gradually realised how wonderfully he had been saved from the effects of his own dishonesty, began to regain courage and cheerfulness. Laura and Winnie found ample and interesting occupation in seeking a house, as Reginald consented to reside in London, though he was somewhat slow in forming, or avowedly forming, his plans. So time went quickly on.

The greatest sufferer was Mrs. Piers. Her pride was deeply wounded, for she had always cherished a species of dislike to Laura, born of pique and resentment at the indescribable superiority which she most unconsciously maintained, in spite of Reginald's desertion and her own position as a poor relation. To have this offshoot of the family put over her son's head—in his place—was too much. Not even the generous readiness with which Laura secured to her for life the same income her son had settled on her could atone to her for the infamous usurpation, as she considered it.

From the time Laura had written a full account of the events here recorded to Denzil Crewe, she was intensely anxious for his return. Her own plans must all remain in abeyance until she could consult him.

The Admiral, perceiving this, sought an interview with the head of the house to which Denzil had been lately admitted a partner, and ascertained that there was no pressing need to prolong his stay. Moreover, when in-

formed of the fortune awaiting his junior, the principal rapidly advanced from civility to cordiality—declared he would write by the post which left next day, and exhort Mr. Crewe to return as soon as possible, and hoped that he would not desert the firm.

Meantime Laura looked eagerly for a reply to her letters written early in January. How often Laura calculated that March would be in its first decade before her long report could be in Denzil's hands, and before his reply could possibly reach her the last of the spring months would be half-way through. Surely his next letter would announce his coming! Laura would not hear of taking personal possession of her house and lands. 'Let time accustom people to the change of owners,' she said, 'and then I will slide into my place.'

May was past its prime, still no letter had reached Laura. The China mail was a couple of days overdue, and she suppressed as much as was in her power the uneasiness and dread that gnawed at her heart. Mrs. Crewe was less restless; all the future was bathed in sunshine to her, and she had gone one evening at this time with much pride and delight to the opera, for which Laura had procured two stalls, and begged Mrs. Crewe to let her stay at home, and to take Miss Brown in her place. Mrs. Crewe had started triumphantly in the congenial character of a patroness.

The Admiral had retired to his own room to proceed with a work he had lately undertaken, chiefly for Laura and Mrs. Crewe's benefit, a sort of commentary or explanation of the 11th chapter of Revelation, for which he was under the impression special light and guidance had been vouchsafed him.

Laura had taken refuge in her painting-room, and begun half mechanically to work at the picture of 'Sunset on the Beach,' which she had never finished, but which was inseparably associated with the happy day when she had sketched it. It was a labour of love to touch and retouch it, while she lived over again in memory the few exquisitely happy hours that succeeded Denzil's avowal and their acknowledged engagement. And then, she thought,

THE ADMIRAL'S WARD.

would Denzil approve the measures she had taken they were of one mind, one faith. She laid aside palette as she thought thus, and sat down by the window through which came the perfume of the many blossoms in Mr. Brown's carefully-kept flower-beds. How often she had looked out upon those little garden plots on which her windows opened in bitterest despondency and self-distrust! Even now she rejoiced with trembling; for how could she tell what the future had yet behind its mysterious curtain? So she wandered into dreamland, forgetful of the present, and deaf to a confused murmur and stir which by and by arose from below. A sudden sharp knock recalled her to herself. Almost before she could say 'Come in,' the door flew open and Denzil stood on the threshold—Denzil, browner and thinner than he was when they parted. An instant's breathless pause of astonished delight, and then she sprang forward and was locked in his warm loving embrace, silent from excess of feeling. While she clung to him, all reserve was swept away by the startling rapture of this sudden meeting—feeling that every doubt and difficulty was at an end now that *he* was present with her.

'At last, my love—my life!' said Denzil, as she gently withdrew from his passionate kiss. 'And I am dear and welcome to you?'

'Oh, *how* welcome!' cried Laura, struggling with the tears that would force themselves from her full heart. 'It has been weary waiting! When, how, did you come?'

'When I had your letter of January,' said Denzil, still holding her to him, 'I had already nearly finished my——k. I was devoured with eagerness to reach the home I knew was waiting for me; so, as the same mail brought me a very friendly communication from my partners desiring me to return as soon as possible, as they understood my private affairs required my presence, I determined to answer your letter in person. There were a few days to spare before the next mail went. I managed to start by it, reached Falmouth last night, and here I am.'

Then came a confused exchange of question and answer, and Laura eagerly poured out something of the load she had longed for him to share.

form they had somewhat calmed down, Denzil, after a short pause in their quick-flowing talk, exclaimed : 'For one circumstance I do especially thank Heaven. It is that you were pledged to me *before* this extraordinary discovery took place. I should have been barred from aspiring to the wealthy heiress ; but *you* know, my darling, you were as rich a prize to me the day you put your hand on mine, as if you gave me the gold diggings of California with it. There is no need to explain this to you, yet I should not have liked to pose before the world as a fortune-unter.'

'I should not have thought you one ; what matter for the rest ?' said Laura, with a happy smile.

'Nevertheless, I am glad it is so,' said Denzil gravely. 'I am not at all pleased you have inherited this property, Laura.'

'I am not sure that I am either,' she returned.

'It is awfully hard lines for Reginald Piers and that charming wife of his, and I am glad you have provided for them. But you and I would have got on very well ; whereas, now I am bound to make even more money, not to be overshadowed by my wife. It is curious, and shows how unjust the préjudices of personal likes and dislikes make a man ; but in my own mind I felt a little surprise that Reginald Piers, feeling himself safe, as he must have done, from every chance of detection, should have acted the honourable part he did.'

'Why should you have doubted him ?' asked Laura carelessly, and passed to some other branch of the subject without waiting for a reply.

At last they remembered the Admiral, and repaired to his apartment to pay him a visit.

It was a night long to be remembered—the rapturous delight of Mrs. Crewe on finding her beloved boy ready to receive her on her return from the opera, the pouring forth of accumulated information respecting the sayings and doings of the last eight or nine months, the boundless content in each other, while Collins waited on them assiduously, and Toppy, after careful inspection, jumped uninvited on Denzil's knee.

The Admiral said a special grace, full of such heartfelt gratitude and thankfulness that Mrs. Crewe was moved to tears.

CHAPTER L.

MR. TRENT'S comfortable house looked itself again. The drawing-room shutters were opened, the newspaper wrappings removed, the chandeliers freed from their imprisonment in holland bags, and, in short, its mistress had come home. That winter of separation had been, according to his own account, a purgatorial period to Mr. Trent; but, in point of fact, both he and his eldest boys found Christmas in Dresden a very pleasant variation from the ordinary festivities of that season in London. Mrs. Trent was not sorry to find herself in her luxurious home towards the end of June, ready to give and accept some dinner-parties before the end of the season; and on the occasion about to be recorded she had arranged a peculiarly *recherché* little dinner for a party of twelve of her husband's more intimate legal acquaintances.

Host, hostess, and guests were in excellent spirits; the service and the viands were equally good; all went smoothly; conversation flowed freely and brightly; there were several excellent talkers present, and Mrs. Trent knew how to throw the ball. German politics had been ventilated *à propos* of Mrs. Trent's visit, the last remarkable trials were mentioned, curious items of intelligence concerning them discussed, *bon mots* of counsel repeated and a few more perpetrated, and every one was pleased with him and her self.

'That is a curious story about the Pierslynn property,' observed Mr. Watkins, a rising barrister. 'There have been paragraphs in most of the morning papers about it. Was not young Piers in your office, Trent?'

'Yes; he was articled to us, and was out of his time, but still working for the firm, when his cousin broke his neck and he stepped into the estate.'

'And now he has proved to be illegitimate, or so—'

such thing,' said Mr. Blenkinsop, the well-known parliamentary solicitor.

'Not at all,' cried his wife. 'Some relation, a poor girl who was employed by a milliner—they say, Madame Elise—turned out legitimate, and has a prior claim.'

'You are all wrong,' said Mrs. Trent, laughing; 'both parties happen to be relatives of mine, and, as the story is to the credit of both, I will tell you the facts.'

And Mrs. Trent gave what might be termed the principal points of the case. 'Thus,' she concluded, 'the property has changed hands with very little profit to the "gentlemen of the long robe," as the papers say.'

'Very hard on Piers,' growled Thornton, Q.C. 'Could he not get up a case of any kind?'

'Impossible,' returned Mr. Trent. 'He had no choice between destroying the documents and holding his tongue, or giving up his estate. He wisely chose the last, for dishonesty rarely pays; and Miss Piers, who is a very accomplished ladylike girl, has behaved exceedingly well; they had always been on friendly terms. She settles a thousand a year on him and his wife, or the survivor of them, and has bought a house for them, also settled on the wife; while she gives Mrs. Piers senior the same income (five hundred a year) that her son allowed her; and what makes it more praiseworthy, Reginald Piers had managed, besides of course spending the income of the property, to get rid of upwards of eight or nine thousand pounds.'

'He seemed to live tolerably fast,' said Mr. Thornton.

'He made no great show, and Mrs. Piers did not give me the idea of extravagance,' observed Mrs. Trent.

'Board of green cloth, eh?' suggested Watkins.

'It is impossible to say,' returned Mr. Trent.

'What is the poor devil going to do?' asked Mr. Thornton. 'He cannot live on a thousand a year after spending—what was the rent-roll?'

'Five thousand.'

'No. He is far too shrewd and active a fellow to lie idle. I have advised him to study for the Bar; that was his ambition formerly, but he was too poor to wait for briefs. He is going to take my advice, I believe.'

'I daresay he will do very well,' said Mr. Blenkinsop, who has reduced himself by his own straight-

forward honesty will start with a useful reputation ; the very circumstance will put him well before the world.'

'I remember him,' observed Mr. Watkins. 'He was a very smart fellow, well connected too. Is he not brother-in-law to that queer little litigious north-country baronet, Sir Gilbert Jervois ?'

'He is,' returned Mrs. Trent ; 'and he is married to such a charming pretty creature—quite a love-match.'

'I hope the love will not fly out of the window under the present circumstances. Love is somewhat of a summer bird,' said the Q.C.

'But, by Jove, what a catch Miss Piers of Pierslynn will be !' cried young Richard Thurston. 'She is no beauty, I believe.'

'Beauty or no beauty,' returned the host, 'she is an uncommonly nice girl, and an artist of no mean ability ; but she is not in the market ; she is going to make a rather indifferent marriage. It seems before this curious discovery made her heiress, she had engaged herself to the son of the lady with whom she lives. He was captain of one of Gibbs Brothers' ships, and must be a steady fellow, for they have taken him into partnership.'

'What ! going to marry a merchant skipper ?' cried young Thurston, with contemptuous surprise.

'Impossible !' exclaimed Mrs. Blenkinsop, with horror.

'Will she not listen to the remonstrances of her friends ?' said Mrs. Watkins.

'I do not think they venture to remonstrate,' replied Mrs. Trent, 'as her guardian, Admiral Desbarres, makes no objection. I wish it were a better match ; but I do not see how she was to break her promise to a man who proposed for her when she had nothing.'

'It is evident,' said Mr. Thornton, 'that the Piers family, to which, I believe, our fair hostess belongs, are of the *sans peur sans reproche* order, whose word is their bond.'

'I hope so,' said Mrs. Trent, smiling ; 'and in token of my sympathy with my cousin Laura, I have promised to assist at her wedding on the fourth of next month.'

Once more the curtain goes up, five years having elapsed since the last act.

Scene—an artistically-furnished morning-room, overlooking Regent's Park.

Mrs. Piers-Crewe, fairer, brighter, better-looking than of yore (for nothing beautifies like unselfish happiness), is discovered sitting by a writing-table, trying to teach the alphabet to a brown-eyed, brown-haired urchin of perhaps three years old, by means of picture-cards thrown on the floor.

'Bring me B, Georgie.'

Georgie, after a short search, proudly produces S.

'No, no, my darling; try again. This—rapidly printing it on her notepaper—is the shape of B.'

Master George lies down with an air of determination, and after much turning over of the cards selects R.

'That is a little nearer,' said his mother, laughing; but—'

'Mrs. Reginald Piers,' announced a footman, opening the door and ushering in Winifrid. She was as handsome as ever; indeed handsomer, with a look of thought in her eyes, a sweet pensive expression upon her lips.

Laura came forward to meet her with the old tender cordiality.

'So you are teaching the poor little fellow already,' said Winifrid, taking Georgie on her knee, and parting his abundant fringe the better to kiss his brow.

'It is as good a play as any other,' returned the mother, 'and he will come to know the letters in time.'

'Perhaps so. I am not so *prévoyante* as you; I never was. How is the Admiral, Laura?'

'Very much the same,—weak and averse to take nourishment, but suffers no pain; he seems wonderfully happy. I do not fancy any one knows how much he has suffered from religious doubts and difficulties; and he told me yesterday that, instead of bodily weakness obscuring his mind as it was usually supposed to do, his spiritual power seems to grow as his strength declines, and he added: "I begin already to catch glimpses and hear echoes of what eye has not seen or ear heard." He spoke with such a profound conviction that for an instant I felt a strange thrill. What wondrous power there is in religious enthusiasm!'

'There is indeed,' returned Winifrid.

'Shall you be able to move the Admiral to the country this summer?'

'I hope so. You know there is really nothing the matter with him; he is just burning out, like a flame too strong for what it feeds upon.'

'How terribly Mrs. Crewe will feel his loss!'

After a short pause Winifrid resumed:

'Do you ever look at the "Births, marriages, and deaths?"'

'Very seldom, I am ashamed to say. Why?'

'Because,' said Winnie, 'the marriage of Madame Moscynska with an American was in yesterday's *Times*.'

'Indeed!' cried Laura. 'It is years since we have heard her name.'

'Ah! I wish we had never heard it,' returned the other; 'she did not leave a blessing behind her. However, when I showed the announcement to Reginald, he smiled rather grimly, and just said, "Won't she make his dollars spin!"'

'Well, she has long been removed from your path,' observed Laura, 'and I think—I hope, dearest Winnie—that your life has been tranquil and happy since—since Reginald took so steadily and successfully to work?'

'Oh yes, it has been calm; I should like to see more of *you*, dear Laura; but, I do not know how it is, there seems always some obstacle to our meeting, save in the morning. I often want Reggie to go out more of an evening; he works too hard.'

'Winnie, do not ask too much of human nature. It is not possible that Reginald can care to be much with us. How can he forget that I have pushed him from his place?'

'He ought only to remember your goodness, to be pleased at his own success! Do you know, he has been asked to stand for Thirlstane, near Sir Gilbert's place in the north, and will probably be returned?'

'That will please him; he is naturally a politician.'

'He never seemed to care for anything but pleasure in the old Pierslynn days. How is Mr. Crewe?'

'Remarkably well; always busy.'

'I do believe,' said Winnie thoughtfully, 'that you are a very happy couple.'

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inheritance that could never be theirs! and how could I account for receiving an income from you, on whom I have no claim ?'

Reginald sprang from his seat and walked to and fro restlessly.

'But, Laura,' he exclaimed, resuming his chair again, 'if these cursed lawyers get their fingers into the caldron, they will stir up all kinds of mischief! They will tell you you can claim all the money I have spent since I held the estate; they will want to know what I have done with it; and, Laura, I must *not* have that question raised !'

'Can you not trust me, Reginald? Do you think I would really injure you? Do you think I would ask for any of the money I fear you have squandered? Be a man, Reginald! put the past away from you—lay hold of the future. You have that in you to win a place yet, as good as what you lose now; but I am resolved to prove my father's legitimacy, my own claims, and—you are in my hands.'

She spoke low, but with indescribable force and distinctness, with a flash of spirit, of unconscious command, that startled her cousin as a revelation.

He rested his elbows on the table, and covered his face with his hands. When he looked up, there was a sullen, beaten look in his face, that made Laura's heart ache.

'As you will,' he said, in a low tone, and paused again. 'Now, to settle how we shall carry out this tragi-comedy. I shall take these letters, and say I found them among old papers belonging to John Piers, the late man's father. It so happens there are several letters from Geoffrey Piers, your grandfather, respecting his son. One tells of his removal from Llanogwen to a school near London; another describes his having had a severe attack of fever; and the third, in 1831, when he must have been ten or eleven, entreats the friendly protection of the head of the family for his poor solitary boy, who would soon be an orphan, as he feels his end approaching. By putting all together in the same old yellow envelope, no one will suspect that all were not originally wrapped up together.'

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